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BERTL

A STORY OF A UNIQUE
HOLOCAUST SURVIVAL



-BERTL 1931 - 1999

BERTL

A STORY OF A UNIQUE
HOLOCAUST SURVIVAL

Dedicated to George

Bertha Geminder Brotfeld

An Interview by

Judy Strauss Geminder

&

Susie Strauss Ross

Edited by Robert Geminder

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The long and tedious task of transcribing from voice tapes to computer was accomplished by Diane DeWitt, a very good friend of Robert's.

This is the second edition of **Bertl**. Future plans include the addition of more stories and the publishing of the book.

PII Redacted

INTRODUCTION

Bertl is "a story of a unique holocaust survival". Bertl, Bertha Geminder Brotfeld; her two children, George and Robert Geminder; and her second husband, Emil Brotfeld, survived the Holocaust and immigrated to the United States.

What makes this survival so unique? Simply that a woman and her two small children, all Jews, survived those horrible years in Poland, from 1939 to 1945.

The only way that Bertl could recount these horrible years was by the assistance of two people, Judith Geminder (Robert's wife) and Susan Ross (Judy's sister). Judy and Susie interviewed Bertl, asking questions and obtaining the answers as to what transpired during the Holocaust years.

The words, phrases, and sentences spoken by Bertl were not edited. They were left the same, in English which is not perfect, and in an accent which cannot be placed on paper.

The Bertl story starts with a description of "how life was" prior to 1939. This early story helps to explain why Bertl and the family stayed in the area until it was too late.

The families of Bertl and her second husband, Emil, were very large; however, only four people survived the atrocities of the Holocaust. The heroics of Emil and the courage of Bertl cannot be totally described in this story. An attempt is made to tell most of the story. Part of the uniqueness of Bertl is the way it is presented, questions by two American girls, and answers by Bertl. Both Judy and Susie lived in America during the Holocaust, and the story as told was totally inconceivable to them. Many times during the tape recordings, tears and emotions stopped the continuation of the story. Several places include brief explanations provided by Robert, which are in parentheses.

The story of Bertl is done so that Bertl's grandchildren, Hope, Miriam, Ellen, Shia, Michael, Jennifer and Bertl's great grandchildren Lauren, Tara and Nicaela "will never forget".

THE EARLY DAYS...

We want you to talk about yourself and your life so that our children, and our children's children, and our children's children's children will know all about you and the story of the War.

I'd be very glad to. I was born in 1912.

Where were you born?

In Poland... oh no, then it was Austria. It became Poland in 1918, after the first world war. In Bielsko, my maiden name was Glotzer.

And your first name?

My first name is Bertha.

But didn't they call you something else?

Bertl. My father, when he was mad, called me Bluma, my Hebrew name.

My mothers name was Goldie, my father's name was Ira, we called him Ere. My father was in the army in Bielsko. My mother and my Aunt Regina, a younger sister, were having a hard time when my father was in the army with cooking for the soldiers' dinners so they could make a go of it. We were living in a little room with a kitchen, with two children, me and my brother. My brother was a year older than myself; his name was Arthur. After the first world war in 1918, my father bought a house in which we lived until I got married. We couldn't have an apartment in the house, so we built a floor on the top floor. We had a beautiful apartment and my father started to make business.



1918
Bertl at the age of 6, her brother Artur Glotzer,
and parents Golde and Ira Glotzer

What kind of business?

He was in the cattle business. He transported cattle from Galezia, Poland, which was around Lemberg, a bigger city. He transported whole trainloads of cattle and sold the cattle to butchers. He also delivered for the military, so we became, not rich, but we were well off. We had a very nice apartment in our house.

I went to kindergarten with Nuns as teachers. I remember it very well, I made for my mother a little basket, hand made.

You mean you went to a convent?

No, a Catholic school.

The Jewish girls went there?

Yes.

There were no public schools? Or there were but you didn't go?

There was. I didn't go. But from the first grade, I went to a Jewish school until the fifth grade.

A private Jewish school?

No. No it wasn't a private Jewish school.

Just that lots of Jewish kids went?

Only Jewish kids went. I went only to German schools. It was Poland already, but the city was on the border of Germany and lots of German people and Austrian people were living there, and then they had mostly German schools. Nobody spoke Polish. In our later years I only had once a week, the Polish lesson like you would here take French or Spanish. I went to grade school, to a Jewish school, like I said, and then I went to the German Burgerschulle which I finished when I was 17. Then I went 3 years to a home economics school, where I learned economics. It was very good for me, because later on when I came to the United States I could have this job in the Home for the Aged (Bertl was the head cook and dietician in the Jewish Home for the Aged in Pittsburgh, PA). I learned hand work and cooking, but only fine cooking, like very fancy cakes and so, at which I was very bad.

Anyway, when I was 19 years old, we went once to a coffee house with my parents, my aunt, and my brother. We did this very often. There were two men sitting at another table, and my father said hello to them, and he invited them to sit at our table. One of these men was to be my husband, Mano. I didn't know that my father had made a date with this one man and my future husband, to meet then.



1904 in Kalusz, Austria

Bertl's grandfather, Gadalia (second row with heavy beard); Bertl's grandmother, Freida (with babushka) is left of Gidalia; Bertl's mother, Golda, at the age of eighteen, is on the right of Gidalia; and the rest are other family members,



1929 in Franzenbod, Czechoslovakia

Bertl's father, Ira Glotzer; Bert's mother, Golda (to the left); Bertl's aunt, Bella Chotiner and Bella's daughter Sylvia Richman. (Bella and Sylvia lived in the USA)

You mean they did it on purpose?

Yes.

Oh... he made the arrangement!

What I was told later, was that this man's name was Krumholtz (the man who arranged the meeting with my father).

Same Krumholtz that we know?

No, no, no... He was living in Germany in Breslau, and he was in Bielitz (Bielsko). Krumholtz met my father somewhere and he says, "You know I saw your daughter in the street, and I have a very nice man for her and he would like her." My father said, "Who is the man?" "He's a very rich man!" So I guess this was enough for my father. Anyhow, he says that he can meet us when he comes to Bielitz. So, a few weeks later my father called and said to my mother, my mother probably knew about it, "Let's go to the cafe house tonight." Like I said, they did it all. So I met my husband. We walked home, they let me go with him. I didn't have an idea that they had something on their mind.

That they set it up?

And next day Mano Geminder invited me to go to a movie, "Faust." And a few months later, we got engaged.

Bertl and Mano Geminder



1931, Bielsko, Poland
Engagement Photograph

Tell me about your wedding.

My wedding...

Tell me about your engagement. How long were you engaged before you got married?

A year. We were engaged a year.

And he lived in Berlin?

In Breslau.

In Breslau. And you lived in Bielitz. How far were they from each other?

By train about... let's see, about 9 hours by train, (at that time).

So he went back and forth?

Yes, he came at least every month. You know, after the first. The first he had to be home to get rent from the houses, to put the money in the bank from the buildings he had.

He was in real estate?

He was not in real estate, but he had his own apartment buildings. He was out of business already, he had a restaurant and hotel with his brother.

Which brother was that?

Brother Leo. His older brother. Irma's husband and Egon & Margit's father. (Irma moved to Brazil before World War II and lived there. Egon and Margit are now living in Rio de Janeiro.)

And they sold the restaurant and hotel, when Hitler started to be around in 1931. So he was actually, when I got married, retired. But he was busy going to these buildings every morning and looking to see that everything was all right. There had to be some painting done or something. Every building had a manager.

How many buildings did he have?

When I got married there was one in Berlin, and three in Breslau. So Berlin, they only sent him the money. We went only once to Berlin, he wanted to show it to me. So we went with our friends by car on the autobahn. Matter of fact, the property is on the East side (part of the Berlin wall). The windows come out on the West side.

It's part of the wall?

That's right. Let me have some coffee...



1932, Bielsko, Poland
Marriage Photograph of Bertl to Mano

So tell us about your wedding.

My wedding...

Where was it?

In Bielsko. In the temple.

We had in our building, a lawyer. Marienberg was his name. He had an office there and his apartment. He had the whole floor, so he emptied out his apartment and the office. The wedding was in the Temple, the Rabbi was Stein. I remember the name, I loved him. And you wanted first to hear of my engagement?

I thought you were finished with it?

Noooo!

Go back over the engagement, come back to the wedding.

So my husband came about every month. He came to visit us. First of all, when I got engaged, I got this tremendous big diamond.

Was there a party?

There was a party, sure, by a Rabbi. And then I got this gorgeous ring. He had it in his vest, in this little pocket here. It was five carats, a big one. And I showed it to my girlfriends next day, everybody was so envious. This was so important when I was 19 years. Anyhow, he came to visit, and whenever he came, he brought me the most gorgeous gifts. And we had a good time in our engagement because I was always awaiting his coming and his going and then his coming and then his calls. We got married March 13, 1932. Like I already said, the wedding lasted a week. We had caterers and our cook. My brother-in-law and sister-in-law came from Germany and my cousins from Breslau. Willie Geminder, they came and they said, "I wonder what kind of girl he picked". And my mother made, it was Saturday night, a gorgeous, beautiful dinner in our house. And she naturally took her best silver, her best dishes out. And they saw that I was not just a poor little girl.

At your wedding, did you have a wedding party that you can remember?

Like...

A bridesmaid?

Bridesmaid, no.

Did you have a maid of honor?

No. They didn't have this.

You didn't have a best man?

No.

So who had the ring?

I don't remember.

Did you walk down an aisle at the synagogue?

Yes, with my father and mother.

Father and mother?

Yes and my husband. By the way, his name was Emil, but they called him Mano. He walked down with his brother and sister-in-law.

Did they all stand under the chupah with you?

Yes.

Did you have a cantor too?

Yes, a cantor and a rabbi. Cantor Fisher. And after the wedding, we had a photographer. His name was Kleinberger. He made a picture of me, and he put it in the window of his shop. And after the wedding somebody drove us to the photographer, but we didn't say anything to my mother or

father. They thought we disappeared. It took an hour or more. Everybody was home already by the party, and we were not there.

So the wedding was at the Temple?

The ceremony was at the Temple.

Then you went to the photographer and then you came to this man's apartment?

In our building, yes. There were all the tables, you know, long tables set up in about five rooms.

How many people do you think were at the wedding?

About 300.

My goodness! What day were you married on?

Sunday. In Europe they made all Jewish weddings on Sundays.

So, the dinner Saturday night, was the dinner before the wedding?

Saturday night was the dinner for the guests what came from out of town. It was very nice.

Can you name a lot of the guests that were at your wedding?

The whole city was at the wedding! There are still some people alive, like my girlfriend in Australia. You met her, Clair Cohen, her name was Stern then. She was one of my best girlfriends. Then I had a very, very good girlfriend, she's not alive, Mariana. She played the piano, just like you, Susie. And my girlfriend, who is still in Bielitz, a gentile girl, Dziki.

Oh, I met her.

Yes, Judy, you met her.

My father had a meat store. In Europe you had lots of poor people, Jewish poor people going from house to house to beg. I guess you heard about this. So the week before the wedding, my father gave to all of the poor people, a kilogram of meat. Some came three, some came four times. But this didn't count. These beggars, these poor people, knew it goes from one mouth to another.

Was that tradition, or was that just something your father wanted to do?

No, he just wanted to do this for his only daughter!

Did your father have any brothers or sisters, any aunts?

My father had, brothers and sisters in the United States. He had a step sister, but she died. I think she wasn't alive any more. I don't remember exactly.

So, the only aunt at the wedding was your mother's sister?

Yes, my mother's sister and then my father had his step sister which lived in the same city, and she was at the wedding.

What was her name?

Her name was Kandel.



Bielsko, Poland 1934
Bertl's brother, Artur Glotzer
at the age of 23



Bertl and her brother, Artur Glotzer

And what was your mother's sister's name?

Regina Frost, was her name. I loved her, we were like girlfriends.

But none of the others like Aunt Yetta, Aunt Bella were there? *(Aunt Yetta and Aunt Bella lived in the United States)*

No.

Were there any other Geminders there?

Willie Geminder, and Leon. This was all. Because they were the close relatives. The Geminders in Czechoslovakia, they were in Morawsko Ostrawa, there they lived. They, well, they just didn't come. They were invited.

It was far away.

Well, it really was not, but they just didn't come. But we had plenty of people.

Yes, I would think so. So how does a wedding go on for a week?

Well, these people from Breslau didn't go home. We couldn't go on our honeymoon right away.

Were you supposed to?

We figured to go, but we didn't, because we didn't want to. We weren't going to leave them there, and they wanted to stay.

So you stayed at your mother's house?

We stayed at a hotel.

Do you remember the name of the hotel?

Hotel Schwartzer Adler.

What are Adler? Trees?

No, Adler is a bird.

Blackbird.

Yes, I think so. I could look it up in my dictionary.

In Bielitz?

No, in Biala.

Wonder if it's still there?

Yes, I saw it. The wedding was very nice. I had a very, very beautiful lace dress which was bought in Vienna.

Did you go to Vienna to buy it?

No. I had a dressmaker. She went once or twice a year to buy material.

Patterns?

No, she didn't buy patterns, she bought the dress there. And then I had somebody make up a veil for me. And you know what flowers I had?

Lily of the Valley.

Right.

Because this is my beloved flower. I had it on the veil on one side. We went on our honeymoon to Zakopana (a ski resort in Poland).

You went skiing?

No.

What date did you say it was, March?

March. And on the way back from Zakopana, we stopped in Krakow to see Mano's sister Helen Rottersman. She lived there with her two children. (Helen's son, Joe Rottersman, died in February 2008). We stayed with her a few days. Oh, she was invited to the wedding too, naturally. And she bought me a beautiful pillow for my bed. A big satin, pink satin, pillow. Hand made in the center. Hand made like petty-point stuff. This was a big pillow for both beds, to go across. And Joe was by the wedding with his sister, Mania, anyhow . . . (Mania was killed in the war)

We have it on the family tree.

I know. And after that we went back to Bielitz, and then we went to Breslau.

How long did you stay in Bielitz before you went back?

Just a few days until we got our suitcases. I had a piano which my father bought me when I was about 10 years old. I studied there for about 10 years. I went twice a week for lessons. My husband said, "Just leave the piano here, leave it for your parents." I said, "Uh, Uh! I want my piano!" And they had to crate it, and to send it. I had it in Breslau. I always wanted to study more, because I love to play the piano. Then the children came and everything, so I never returned to it. I wanted to have more lessons even while I was in the States.

You should do it now.

I came to Breslau. I had a gorgeous trousseau, really a beautiful trousseau. You don't want to hear more about the honeymoon do you?

That's up to you. *(Much laughter!)*

It was nice, it was very nice. And my husband was a gentleman, gentleman first class. We came to Breslau, we lived in his apartment. He had an apartment in his own building.

People didn't have individual houses in those days?

Oh yes. But he wouldn't have a house by himself. And when I got married, Hitler was there already, it was uneasy already in 1932.

So you never really lived in a house?

In a house, no.

In an apartment all the time.

All the time. When I came to Breslau, he had a very nice apartment in his building. I think four rooms and a kitchen. But he never wanted to live in his own house when we got married. He had a manager then.

Manager?

Manager. She, it was a woman, she could take care of everything. I got very sick the first year I was married. I got an ear infection and a cold. I was married in March and this was in September, because it was Yom Kippur. We had the doctor, Professor Gerke come to the house and he

punctured , drained the ear. But it did not help. I had a really high temperature and they had to take me to the hospital for an operation; but, my husband, he just didn't want to do it. He was afraid. I did not want to let my parents know about it, because they couldn't come. A passport was needed, it was the border, they just couldn't come!

This Prof. Gerke, had a private clinic. These big doctors in Germany had their own hospitals. And he came and he said to me, "You have to go to the hospital". He didn't talk about an operation right away. So I went to the hospital. My brother-in-law, Leon, and Irma and my cousins, everybody was there, in the evening. It was Saturday. And my husband just didn't want to sign. He says he did not do that, because they had to operate on what's called the mastoid. So my brother-in-law told him, no you cannot sign, let the parents know. So I called in my doctor, what was his name? Not Gerke, another doctor was there. Our house doctor, he came to me in the room, and he said to me, "Look, Bertl, you sign it, you cannot wait until tomorrow morning, you sign it. If your husband is afraid, you sign." So I called in the other doctor, and I said I will sign. They had to operate right there, at night. I was very, very sick for a long time. I was also pregnant with George.

Did you know you were pregnant then?

No. But I had an idea. I was pregnant with George. I knew for sure I was pregnant, while I was in the hospital. And I was coughing and because of the coughing my ear wouldn't heal. I had whooping cough. Well, they let me go home and I went home with a nurse. The nurse went with me for walks, bandaged my head. We went to the doctor to change dressings. Yes, I forgot to tell you, this was on Saturday.

On Sunday morning, my husband got a telephone call, from my parents, from my father. What's new? My mother couldn't sleep at night, she hoped everything was all right. So my husband told them what happened. He said, he's not going to tell my mother. I should try to write a post card. Monday, after the operation, my husband comes to the hospital with a postcard. Tells me I should write. My parents didn't know until I came home. Then, I called them. It wouldn't heal because of the whooping cough. So I had to go for a very, very long time with a bandage around my head and then a black little thing, you know?

Like a scarf?

No, what would you call it?

I don't know.

To cover it,

An ear cup?

Yes, it stayed around my head. And I didn't have hair, half my head was shaved.

Oh your beautiful red hair!

Shaved, yes. Wait a minute, it was in September, George was born May 31st, 1933. I went home to Bielitz to have George. I wanted to be with my mother. And I went home I think in March. Doctor wouldn't let me go because it wasn't healed yet. There was still a little hole there. I had to promise him that I would wear this little bandage on my ear. My brother came to pick me up with the car from the border and he drove me. "Please when you go into the house take this black thing down the minute you come to the house, because if mother will see it, she will die!", he said.

Naturally, I did it.

I was very skinny when I had George. Really, in the back you couldn't even see that I was pregnant. When I went on the street, I was a little bit ashamed. All my old boyfriends, and my girlfriends - here I come with this big stomach.

But you were married, it was ok!

I know, but you know, I was so young, just 20 years old and somehow I felt funny about it.

Your husband didn't go with you?

My husband didn't go yet. He came as soon as he could. What holiday is in May?

Pesach?

No, after Pesach, what comes?

Shavuot.

You asked me of my grandparents, well, yes, my father's father was alive.

So, he was at the wedding.

Yes.

What was his name?

His name was Israel, like Bob's. And he came for the holiday to Bielitz when I was pregnant, he came to Bielitz to visit us. To visit my parents.

Where did he live?

He lived in a little town near Galiczia, near the Russian border. Where my father was born. By the way, my father was two years in the United States when he was a young man.

Before he was married?

Before he was married.

He didn't want to stay?

Well, wait, I tell you. When my father was 16 years old, he had a step mother and he always told us, he went away from home because his step mother wouldn't give him sugar for his coffee. So he went to the United States, he had sisters here. For two years he was in New York, worked, made a few thousand dollars, then, I think, \$2,000 was lots of money. He didn't want an American girl for a wife, so he went back home to get married and come back to the United States. He got married all right, but he never went back to the United States. Where was I?

What was your mother's maiden name?

Segal. Like Uncle Bernard. (*Uncle Bernard was a brother of Bertl's mother. His children reside in Pittsburgh.*)

Was it Shavuot when your grandfather came to visit.

I was knitting a sweater for myself, you know to have something to do while I was pregnant. It was the time when rhubarb was in season, and I just absolutely love rhubarb. It was on a Wednesday. George was born Thursday morning at four o'clock and we had a big dinner, like fish, and all this for Shavuot they put the leaves and stuff around the house.

The decorating?

Yes. And in the afternoon I got pains. My mother, called the midwife. I didn't want to go to a hospital. I wanted the baby at my mother's.

THE CHILDREN, GEORGE AND ROBERT

Did most people go to the hospital then, or did most people stay home?

No, most people had their children at home.

Was your husband there already?

Yes, and in the afternoon I was knitting then running to the bathroom. I ran into my mother's bedroom to lay on the bed, and the midwife was there all afternoon with me, and then we had this big dinner. I couldn't eat, but I ate rhubarb. I was ashamed my grandfather shouldn't know that I'm going to have a baby, or something. I was ashamed of my grandfather, I don't know, I can't explain it, but I remember when I got the pain I was thinking, what will my grandfather think?

You were embarrassed?

I guess so. Whenever I got the pain, I ran into my mother's bedroom. And they had this headboard and by the legs a footboard. I was on it. My midwife called my doctor, but he didn't come. Everybody was up all night.

The whole family?

The whole family was up. It was midnight, and it really was bad, and I said to the midwife to give me a bath. She put me in the bathtub and it was absolutely marvelous! Now we wouldn't do it, would they?

No, no.

She gave me a bath, after which, she put me to bed. Till now I was running around and I insisted that my mother should be with me.

Your poor mother.

Yes! You are right, because my friends were telling me when you scream you get, what do you call it?

A goiter.

A goiter. So I instructed my mother she should take my chin and hold it down, my poor mother!

Oh no!

But she was such a good person. She stayed with me.

Husbands didn't come into the room in those days?

No. Then there was a little boy. The doctor was there too because I was torn, so he had to sew me up.

You had no anesthesia?

No, in those times they gave none.

Nothing?

Nothing, nothing!

I thought they knocked you out?

No, no, no . . . when everything is normal, you have a normal delivery. Yes. But like I said, it was a mistake, the doctor should have made a little cut because I was torn, what you call it?

Episiotomy is what they do now, so you don't tear.

They make a cut, right? Anyhow, here was George, he was just absolutely a gorgeous baby - I will talk about Bobby, too.

How much did he weigh?

You know, I think, he was about 3-1/2 kilo (about 8 pounds), but I'm not positive. But he, before they gave him the bath, you know how they come out, but he was just absolutely beautiful. My girlfriend, Clair Cohen (who now lives in Australia), came to see me about nine o'clock in the morning. She came into the house and when she saw him, she said it's not possible to see a baby with hair, so black, long hair. This is why I had heartburn all the time! Clair came with gorgeous, twelve red roses. And my mother put the baby in a basket from the laundry, because in these times you didn't prepare, you didn't prepare a diaper, nothing!

It was superstitious.

Right, nothing was prepared. (They feared that they would lose the baby if one prepared ahead of time.) And so, there were sheets torn for diapers and stuff like that. So next day my Aunt went to buy them, I think, with my husband.

Better than I remember!

You wouldn't remember?

I don't know.

George's Hebrew name was Yaakov, like my husband's father.

People didn't have middle names in those days?

No, no.

How did you come up with George?

We just figured out the name. We just liked the name George. We don't say George in German, we say Georg.

But nothing to do with Yaakov?

No. The names you gave, the Jewish names, the Hebrew names, they didn't have anything to do with the other names. We figured George Geminder sounds good. We had a beautiful briss by my parents. I had to stay six weeks there because of the pidyon-ha-ben that we made for George. My husband had to go home after the first, and came back. Everybody knows what a pidyon-ha-ben is? (In the Jewish religion, if the first child is a boy, there is a service in which the child is bought from God.) Do I pronounce it correctly?

Absolutely, perfectly.

And after this I went home. I had the nurse in Bielitz. She slept with the baby. I tried to nurse George which I only could do for four weeks. Matter of fact, I was really in bed for about two weeks. Those times they kept you a long time.

May have been a little bit smarter sometimes than what we do.

Yes. And we came home to Breslau and I remember I didn't have anybody for the baby. The next day I gave him a bath, and I burnt my hand terribly. Anyhow, then I got the nurse for him and my girl came back, she was on vacation. Everything started to go good.

We didn't live in our house anymore, we had already decided to live elsewhere. We had an apartment on the South side of Breslau which was a much better neighborhood then where my husband lived by himself. We had six rooms with a kitchen, everything new furnished. Only one room, we took his furniture, and it was called it the Heren-room, like a study. There was this black leather furniture, which I loved.

Persian rugs.

Rugs, right. We bought, we had the furniture made up - you didn't go to a store to buy furniture you had it made up. I had a very, very beautiful apartment, naturally my piano was there, too. I had to go through an operation when I came home. I was sewed up like I told you and it opened. So I had to be operated on. In these years already, I was through hospitals and hospitals. This doctor what sewed me up, sewed me up too much! So I went to another doctor and he said that I have to have another operation, or I have to have a baby. So I decided to have another baby. It was easier.

More fun.

The same again, I did not want to go to a hospital. I wanted to have the baby at home. So the doctor made the hospital in my home.

Did you go back to Bielitz again?

No, no . . . my mother came to Breslau, but this time when I had the baby she got sick and she was in the hospital. I was more than nine months and I just didn't deliver . . .

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened. The doctor sent me on trips in the car with bad streets. He sent me to a bar to drink beer. Nothing happened. So it was on a Saturday morning, he said, "We can't wait any longer, because the heartbeat was low." He said, "I'm going to send the nurse to the house, and

she will give you shots." So she came at seven in the morning and every half an hour I got this shot. It was twelve o'clock noon, August 3. It was very hot outside. My husband went down to a store to buy some fruit to take to my mother to the hospital. When he came back, he heard the screaming already on the streets. Bobby really was born in 20 minutes.

So, Bob was born on August 3, 1935.

That's right. He was born at 12 noon on a Saturday.

George wasn't home. We had already a nurse hired and he was with the nurse in the park. And he came home. My husband very happily showed him: "This is your brother." George took his hand and, POW! - hit him on the face. "What is this, a 'mawpa'?" he asked. (Mawpa is Polish for monkey.) He actually didn't recognize what he saw. Bobby was born with a cord around his neck. And it was really the last minute that we could wait. We had to put him in hot and cold water to revive him.

I didn't know all that.

Didn't you? The doctor, I had a very religious children's doctor, and he drove with his nurse to the house. But he didn't tear off a little piece of cotton. The nurse tore the cotton off (Saturday, the religious doctor could not do anything) and he gave him the shots. Dr. Falk. How do you like the way I remember his name? The doctor told me I should try to be in bed longer maybe I will be able to nurse. I was in bed, I think, four weeks, but soon as I got up I lost the milk. I had to stop nursing.

And you named Bob, Israel, after his . . .

After my father's father. The one what was in Bielitz when I had George.

But he had already died.

Yes. Then we made the briss. Margit (presently resides in Rio de Janeiro) was holding the baby, what is that called?

Godmother.

Yes, and

I'm surprised they let a woman do that.

Carried the baby to.

To bring the baby in you mean.

Right.

I thought the mother did that.

I was in bed. I was still in bed. And they let my mother come to the briss from the hospital. My husband went to pick her up.

Was Robert the name?

Robert was his name, yes. We called him only Robert. The name Bob came in the United States. This you know. We didn't know the name Bob, from Robert. He was a very cute boy.

Ok, tell us more about this cute little boy and his brother as they were growing up when they were little.



1938, Bielsko, Poland
Bertl's two sons, George at age 5, and Robert at age 3

Like I said, I had the nurse and we had one buggy and one stroller. So I went with one, the nurse went with the other one, to the park every day, twice a day. It wasn't like here that you let the kids play outside. You just went in the mornings, 9 o'clock, after they had breakfast. You came home at 12 o'clock, you ate lunch, it was the big meal. George was a very bad eater. And so when my husband came home for lunch he had to come very quietly so George wouldn't hear him because when he heard his father, he wouldn't eat at all. Spoiled! The kids were sleeping. In the afternoon the girl went with the other buggy and the nurse with one again until four or five o'clock to the park. We went at two o'clock with my husband to a cafe house every day. There I met my girlfriends, and he met his people to play cards with. And we were there until five o'clock.



1938, Bielsko, Poland
Robert and his governess

Everyday?

Not on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday and Sunday we went with the kids to the park and met the relatives and friends.

Sounds like it was a nice life.

Yes, very nice. Very, very nice life. I had very good friends there. Amsterdam (she survived the war and lived in Cleveland), you met her already? I think.

Did you ever go, did you go to services ever?

Oh, always. Sure we went to Temple and we went to Saturday services. Not every week.

EARLY NAZI DAYS

Were you separated in the synagogue?

Yes. And naturally, the High Holy days, but it was already not so pleasant. We saw the Hacken-Kreutz, the swastikas on the walls in the cellars on the houses, and we saw already the Hitler Jugen in the brown uniforms, young kids. In 1936, I think, then already you couldn't go to a movie, we couldn't go to theatre, to concerts. We couldn't go to the cafe house anymore. The Jews were not allowed. Jews were dogs.

You mean legally they were not allowed?

There were signs, Jews and dogs are not allowed.

In 1935, before I forget, my Uncle Bernard came to visit from Pittsburgh. He was in my parent's house.

This was your mother's brother.

My mother's youngest brother. Aunt Sadie's husband. He came to Germany to visit us. I remember he told us we should come to the United States. We should try to get out. My husband got letters from his brother Herman from New Jersey. These letters asked us to come to United States, but he didn't want to know about the United States. He (my husband) said always when I get my money to Poland, Poland will be for me the United States. I'm not going to start learning another language, I don't want to go.

In 1936, we only had private get togethers with people in people's houses.

Is that what you did in the afternoons?

Right, and evenings, that's right. We played lots of cards. We couldn't go out, we couldn't go anymore anywhere. My husband, he liked to go out, he did not like to sit home. So we had guests in our house or we went to others, we had very very good friends there, most of them are not alive anymore. We still had a good time.

What was his (your husband's) personality like?

He was good. Never, never I heard him raising his voice. He never put a hand on the kids, once. George when he put his hand on Bob when he was born, he took him in the other room and he probably put his hand under and hit him like on his hand. Never really . . . no he was a very, very quiet man, very outgoing, I would say, that he was a little like Bob.

Bob's not quiet.

No. What I mean, is his nature.

You mean kind.

Yes, he was like George, you know, quiet like. You would say...

More reserved?

Right. But people could reach him, he was reachable, so to say, you know what I mean. Like for instance, you couldn't take any more money out from Germany. You just couldn't. We couldn't go on vacations to Czechoslovakia and take so much money. There was a certain amount. We went in 1937 to Czechoslovakia with the kids, and I have pictures, I think you saw the pictures by the beach.

Did you visit Ishko?

Ishko (Ishko survived the war as a Russian officer and after the war moved to New Jersey.), I met when I went to a funeral in Czechoslovakia. When Wiley died. The guy what was by my wedding, a cousin. He came from the same part of Poland that Walter Geminder. (Walter nows lives in London.)

Tarnow.

Yes, and we could not take any money to Czechoslovakia.

Was it because you were Jews, or nobody could take?

Jews, Jews, no, just Jews. We went once on vacation with the children in the summer with my girlfriends, in Germany. But we couldn't stay. We had to go home, because we just didn't have anywhere to go to eat. Jews were not allowed to go here and there; so we stayed a few days, then we had to go back home.



1937, Marienbad, Czechoslovakia
Bertl at age 25, with her husband, Mano, her mother, Golda, and father, Ira.



1937, Marienbad, Czechoslovakia
Bertl at age 25, with her husband, Mano

Was it so obvious that you were Jewish?

No, we would just not go. You would just not go.

You weren't at the point of having to wear (Jewish arm bands) anything yet?

Not yet, no. This started in the War.

So my husband, for instance, he wanted to get some of the money out from Germany. So the Polish Counsel took our money, because government people, they don't look into their cases or suitcases on the border. So they took the money, and he took it to Warszawa ((Warsaw). My husband went to Warszawa and picked it up. This is how we got some of the money out. So, the life wasn't pleasant anymore.

But I started to tell you about my Uncle Bernard when he visited us. I remember an incident, we went in the afternoon to the cafe house. I got dolled up in a green dress and green coat. I had a green hat. These times you wore hats, I even had some gloves. We went on the street, we walked. He said to me, "You really shouldn't dress anymore like this." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, you know, the people turn around and look, it's not good, you just shouldn't do it anymore." And he really was right. Because you should not...

Call attention.

Call attention to yourself. And I agreed, and I really didn't do it anymore. He was a few weeks with us and talked to us about coming to the States. But my husband didn't want to, like I said before. We still went home (my mother's house) twice a year. We went home for Passover and for Rosh Hashanah and stayed over for Yom Kippur. And this year, in 1938, we did not go home. It was hard to get a visa for us, or something was, I don't remember exactly. Anyhow, we did not go home. The Germans came. It was in 1938. We were Polish citizens. My husband was a Polish citizen living in Germany, you understand?

Why was he a Polish citizen?

Well, he came from Poland. He didn't take the German citizenship.

But how long had he been in Germany before?

Long, long but never became a citizen. So he didn't have to. They came, the Gestapo people, came to the apartment and they told us to take just a little luggage and to come with them. They took us in a train and they send us to the Polish border. I mean hundreds and hundreds of people from all over Germany. And we came to the border town of Zbonszyn. And there the Poles wouldn't let us in. And the Germans wouldn't take us back.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BAD TIMES

Even with your Polish citizenship.

Right. And we were standing there for a few days. It was very tough.

By the train station?

It was not directly by the station, it was on the side like. But after a few days they had to let us in, we were Polish citizens.

Where did you sleep, what did you do?

Sitting up in the train. This was the beginning of the bad times.

You were on the train?

Yes. With the two kids.

Oh, you stayed on the train for a few days?

Yes, yes. The Poles wouldn't let us in, across the border. They had to let us in. And we came to my parents.

You left all your furniture, all your...

And my piano. Everything, we left - even jewelry and money.

Why?

We just didn't have the time. It hit us when they came. We didn't know. It was the first what happened to us really bad.

So they came in and took your jewelry?

I don't know what happened. We just left it. We came to my parents. Naturally, in Poland, they knew about the train. We knew we cannot go back to Germany, we had money there already, in Poland.

This was in '38, right?

Yes.

So Bob was three and George was five.

Right. But it was still not bad. Because I came home, my father had an apartment empty right away downstairs for us, you know. I didn't need a kitchen. I had two bedrooms downstairs for the kids. I right away got the kinder-fraulein (governess). You saw picture of Bob's walks with her.

That was in Poland?

This was when we came home. I mean, when I came to my parent's in '38. In Germany, was a very religious couple, older people, and she packed, you are allowed after a time to send some stuff, and she packed some of our stuff and send it to us. I put it in storage, because we didn't decide where we wanted to live in the city. It still was fine. We weren't suffering for anything. In 1939, we went skiing with George to Zakopany, Bobby was too small.

Did they have restrictions in Poland?

No, no. But they were always very anti-semitic in Poland.

You just felt it, there were no signs.

No. No, there were no signs. I forgot to tell you, in Germany, I think it was in 1937, I'm not sure, when Hitler marched into Austria. My husband got his first heart attack. The drapes, fell down, and he was in his room. His study where I told you this black furniture was. He went up on the desk, I remember, to fix the hook on the drape, he came down and he...

Collapsed?

Collapsed. Naturally I called the doctor and he was at home. They didn't have to take him to the hospital, I don't remember, I think it was in '37.

So how did they know it was really a heart attack?

Well, the doctor knew. They had this machine.

And they didn't put him in the hospital!?

No. They didn't. Maybe because of the times and so. Maybe the heart attack wasn't this bad.

When I met Ishko, you asked, he couldn't go to the funeral when his cousin died because he was sick. So I went to Czechoslovakia to Morawska Ostrawa, where most of the Geminders were living. And then by the funeral, I met Ishko. This Wiley was an Uncle of Ishko's. Ishko's father was a brother to Wiley. Then later on I will meet this story, you know, this is why I point it out. Anyhow, we stayed in Bielitz. Like I said, we went skiing with George in 1939.

Your husband went skiing too?

No. Just George and myself. Mano didn't ski. I remember when we came home already, it was in March I think. People were sending their stuff away, like suitcases to inside of Poland. My town, Bielsko, was a border town. It was on the border from Czechoslovakia and Germany. So we heard that children and mothers went to inside of Poland, like to Krackow, to have the children safe. I went away with the kids.

September 1st the war started. I think the middle of August, I went to Krackow. I packed everything. I couldn't take everything with me, so I left some stuff with my husband. My husband didn't go with me. I went to Krackow to Joe's mother (sister of my husband). She helped me find an apartment. I found a very nice apartment. I had the kinder-fraulein with me. The same one I had from the beginning, the German one. When the kids went on the street they only spoke German. You weren't allowed to speak German in Poland. So they were told, go on the street, but don't talk. So for Bobby it was a real hard time not to talk. Anyhow, I was in Krackow and my

husband was in Bielitz with my parents and my brother. They had the car.

They weren't going to move in?

Yes, they were still waiting. The war started on a Friday and they came to Krackow Friday evening with the car. My brother, Arthur, still stayed in Bielitz, because he was supposed to sell the stuff from the store, as Saturday was a big day. So he wanted to stay and sell. And they came to Krackow and came to the apartment. The chauffeur was supposed to go back with the car to take the car to my brother. I asked my husband, "Did you bring the silver what we have there in the basket I prepared for you and the winter clothes for us?" No, there was no place in the car. So I said, "We need them." I didn't have any winter coat for the boys. So I decided that I'm going to go back with the chauffeur.

How far was it?

By car, two hours. My husband didn't want me to, but then I had so much energy. My father said, "Sure, you can go. And then you come with Arthur back." So I went with the chauffeur, and we didn't want to go in with the car to the city, so we left the car in the Hotel Schwertzer Adler.

Where you spent your honeymoon?

Yes. We left the car. We were afraid to go in with the car to the city, because the soldiers took the cars away. I went to the house, it was very quiet. It was at night, and there was nobody there but our cook, Rosa, and an Uncle, this step sister's husband from my father's sister, what I told you, was at the wedding. We went into the house.

Was Rosa Jewish?

Rosa was Jewish, yes. She was with us since I was eight years, seven years old. She didn't want to go because she has to watch the house. The chauffeur told me he wouldn't go back, he will stay in Bielitz with his family. He's not going back. So I didn't have anybody to take the car back.

What about Arthur?

He wasn't home anymore. It started to be very bad. The Germans were coming. He couldn't wait until Saturday, so he went early.

But you didn't know that.

When I came home, I saw he wasn't there. I didn't know that when I came.

Telephones weren't...

No, nothing was working. So this Uncle, he says, "You know what, let's go to the train. I think in the morning, the train will leave to Krackow." So we took this basket with the silver, both of us, and winter clothes and we went to the train.

You mean you could just travel freely with silver and stuff?

Yes. We came to the train. It was the last train going out to Krackow. And we went with the train for three days to Krackow.

Why? If it was only 2 hours by car?

Tracks were being bombed. It was bombed, and we had to go out and in, three days.

You could have walked faster.

And we came to Krackow. I went to the apartment and there I saw a wagon with horses by the apartment. I see my father loading stuff, our suitcases. They were ready to leave without me, because they thought I wouldn't come back. My mother fainted when she saw me. Anyway, we loaded everything. My father bought two horses and the wagon, so we can go out of Krackow.

Instead of a car?

Where could you get a car?

You just left the other car there?

Yes, there in the Hotel. Everything was left. We were very lucky because everybody was walking out of the city and we were, on the wagon.

You were going to go East.

We were going to go East, right.

To somebody's house?

We had relatives near the Russian border, like where we later came - Stanislawow. We had relatives. This was the part of Poland where my parents came from, where they were born.

So they knew the area well?

Right. But we couldn't get in there. They didn't let us, the Polish army didn't let us go in there.

They stopped you on the road?

That's right. Well, there are thousands and thousands of people walking and wagons and horses like us, but more people walking.

You still, not even at that point, thought about going to America, it was too late already?

It was too late. We went to Wolyn. This is another part of Poland. We went after the Polish army. Where they were going, we went after them, they let us go. It wasn't just us, thousands and thousands . . .

On the wagon were you, your husband, the two children and your parents and your brother?

No, we didn't know where my brother was. This Uncle, the kinder fraulein, and the man what was driving with the horses. Not everybody could get it, but my father, you know, we were not one day hungry with my father there.

Was it because you were wealthy?

No, because he knew how to do it. You know, he changed this for that. He didn't want to see the children hungry. I remember I had beautiful down, silk, what you cover up, what you call, comforter. Blue one side and pink the other side. You know we were watching it at home, it shouldn't get dirty. When we went to a house to sleep over night I put it on the floor for the children, you know, we covered them up with it. Nothing meant anything. Nothing.

Did you have any money?

Yes. We had money and I had all my jewelry. My father had other stuff we could trade. You know, cigarettes and stuff like this, with the people on farms. They gave him food for it. We were bombed on the way. We had to run in the woods, away from the bombing, you know, and lie down on the ground. We saw the fires going up from the bombs. It was a terrible, terrible experience. At night we tried to go to families, they took you in. There we slept on the floors.

Just Polish families?

We looked for Jewish. My father found Jewish families.

Farmers?

No, it was already little towns. And sometimes we went by farmers, gentile farmers, you know.

Jews were not farmers?

No, no.

But the Jews stayed in the towns? They were not leaving?

No, they were not leaving. There wasn't anywhere to leave. Where do you go? We were pretty far from the Germans. We were very much worried about my brother. When my mother left she gave him all the jewelry to hold, her jewelry. So he had all the jewelry, gold dollars, and diamonds. So when they take him to the army, which he was an age to go to the army, they would take everything away from him.

But you didn't know where your brother was at that time?

We did not know where he was. On the way when we were running away from the Germans, my father always took someone from the road, a man or somebody he knows and invite them to go a little bit with the wagon. So one of us was walking.

We came to a little town, very little town, very, very little town, and it was a holiday. I think it was Rosh Hashanah, I don't remember, but a holiday. And we had a chicken, and my mother cooked the chicken and made soup.

How could you cook?

By the Jewish people. We were supposed to stay over night with these people. My father always went around the police station to find out how the situation is. So when the police was packing and running away, he knew it was time for us to run, too. Because the police was the first in the town or city what would go away from the Germans. You understand?

Why?

Because the police would be shot right away. It was like military.

So we had this nice chicken soup all ready, and my father went to hear how the situation is in the city. The situation was bad. The children were sleeping, matter a fact, just a nap. We took them quickly on the wagon, and we left everything standing, naturally, and we went away. We came to another bigger town. We drove all night, we couldn't stop. We heard the shooting and the bombing, and the Germans went after the Polish army and here we were with the Polish army. We came to this little town, and again we stopped. I think we stayed there a couple days then the Russians came.

These were only Jews that were marching, right? The Poles weren't marching away?

Oh yes.

The Poles were also running. Did the people that you walked with, did they know you were Jewish?

Oh yes, definitely, sure. But it wasn't just the Jews running away, people were running away. You know, like from my town, Bielitz, there were Folks Deutsche, which means you had people what great grandparents, or great-great grandparents were Germans and they stayed in Poland after 1918. And they were called Folks Deutsche. When the Germans came, they changed, they were now German. You understand what this means?

So we stayed and the Russian came. It was already easier. The Russians didn't go after the Jews. So we stayed there.

And they were just coming across to meet the German army?

Right.

And the Polish army was in between?

Yes, the Polish army was there. I really don't know what happened to them. They run away, some to England, some to other countries around there, and some stayed.

You mean, they deserted? Ran away?

No, it was, they were finished with their war. The Russians took over one part of Poland and the Germans took over a part of Poland. Didn't you learn it in school?

No.

We did not know where my brother was, if he's alive, or if he's in the army, what happened to him. One Saturday we stayed with a family, they gave us a room. They had two rooms. We were sleeping on floors, wherever we could. You know, a Jewish family. And in the evening, Saturday it was, we didn't put any lights on. They didn't have any electricity in this room. They had a lamp.

Kerosene lamp.

Yes. We didn't put it on because you had to save the kerosene and Shabbat wasn't over. It was a religious family. We were sitting there, and the door opens and my brother comes in with his friend from Bielitz, his best friend, Wasserberger was his name. Well, I just cannot tell you what happened next!! I have to tell you how he found out where we were. You remember, always its good to do something good in life because it pays you back. When we were going with the wagon, my father took people on the wagon, they would ride and we walked. So he took somebody, I don't remember who it was, on the wagon, and this somebody went later to Lemburg, where the Russians were. We were thinking of going there too, but we were a big family with small children, and we couldn't do it so fast. Because the trains were not running yet. So this man, was in Lemburg in a cafe house.

A bar?

No, no this wasn't a bar, and he saw my brother there.

This particular man, he saw my brother and he went over to my brother and he said, "What are you doing here? Your parents are there in Wolyn." Well, my brother, he naturally didn't know we were alive. So he took a train. There were trains going part of the way. Then you were hitchhiking like with the Russian military car.

My brother came into this room, it was dark, and we really didn't realize it was him. My father got up and lit the light and it was very, very . . . emotional. Really was. He told us what happened to him and now we were all together - the whole family.

Didn't your brother have a girlfriend?

Yes. But she was in another city. Matter of fact, this was a girl from Breslau, and they came also to Katowice. Not when we came. She was his girlfriend. Shlur was her name.

Anyhow, now we had to try to get to our relatives in Lemburg, where my parents came from. There, we were not at home, where we were.

Which relatives?

My cousins, and my mother had a brother.

But how do we come there? Trains were going, but not from station to station. You had to hitchhike a little. Here we were a big family. So, we went, and we hitchhiked. Two officers took George in a car and we said we'd meet them there.

Weren't you scared?

At first no, but then I was scared when George wasn't there. So we thought they kidnapped him or something.

Russian officers?

Yes. In the Russian army. And we went with other cars and trucks wherever we could.

How did you communicate with the Russians?

Well, we spoke the language. I knew very little Polish, and Russian is similar. My father spoke the language, my mother did, and so it was easy. And we came to a bigger city where we met again, and the family - I still had the German kinderfraulein with me. Didn't know what to do with her.

She wasn't Jewish?

No. She was not Jewish. She was German. We waited for George with these two officers, and they came. I can tell you this much, I was plenty scared.

Why did they only take George?

There was no room. You know, it was a little jeep and so there was place for one and place for another in another, two or so. They went a certain place where a train was going, and we met there.

How did the rest of you get there? By hitchhiking in separate cars?

That's right. By a truck where more people could go. And we came to a certain city, and we took the train, and slowly we came to Lemburg. My father wanted to settle in Lemburg because it was a bigger city, but we just could not get a room or an apartment. We were sleeping in the train station for weeks. We decided to go to Stanislawow where a cousin of mine was living. My Aunt Regina and her husband and two children were there. So we came to the cousins in Stanislawow, Bronia was her name. Bronia Kupperman. She was my mother's brother's daughter. We stayed with her a few days, and my father got for us an apartment. Not an apartment, a room, from a man by the name of Eisner. On the Belvaderska street. I am sure the boys remember this. We could use the kitchen. Mr. Eisner, he was a man by himself. An older man, and when he wanted to go to his room, he had to go through our room, so you can imagine. In this one room, we had one bed a sofa, and a crib. Both boys were sleeping in the crib. It must have been a bigger one, how did they sleep both in the crib? I don't know. Wait a minute, 1939, they were 4 and 6, right.

And now we had to do something with this kinder-fraulein. The Russians let the Germans go out. They were allowed to go out to Germany. This is what we did. We paid her. We paid her the trip. We were very happy to get rid of her. Because we all felt very uncomfortable with her.

We stayed there with the Russians for about a year. I had to work, by the Russians, somebody in the family, my husband couldn't work because he was a very sick man (his heart condition). I was working in an ice cream store. Getting the ice cream and dished it out in the cones. The Russians eat a lot of ice cream.

In 1940, the Russians started the war with Germany. And before this, people like us were called Fluchtlinge. People that came from another part of Poland to Stanislawow or to Lemburg where the Russians were. They could register.

Refugees?

Yes, refugees, they could register to go back to their home town, if they want to be with the Germans. Well, it wasn't such a big pleasure to be with the Russians and the Germans did not kill yet. No concentration camps in 1940. So I went ahead and I registered for my husband and for the children to go back to my home town.

As Jews?

Yes. And my father had with the Russian officer's, connections. He heard they were going to take these people and not send them back to the Germans, they're going to send them to Siberia. He heard they were going to take these people at night. The ones who registered. We were hiding in the cellar, our whole family.

So that you wouldn't be sent to Siberia?

So they wouldn't take us. And he told many people that he could think of, like my Aunt Regina, who registered like us, to go back with their families.

Why were they going to do that?

The Russians?

Yes, why would they tell you to register if they were going to do that?

Because this is how they want to find out who is with the Germans. Who wants to go back to Germany. So they took many, many people and put them in trains, open trains. We were told later, they send them to Siberia and lots of Jews survived there.

They sent them to camps?

They sent them to Siberia to work, labor work. But they didn't kill them, they died by themselves from the cold, not enough food and so forth. Well, we didn't go and now the war between Germany and Russia started.

In Poland?

In Poland, yes. My father could have, the whole family could have gone to Russia, because a few Russian officers wanted to give him a truck to take the whole family, the children and everybody in the truck. My brother was married in the mean time, and he had a child.

Your brother?

Yes, my brother got married during the war. In Stanislawow, he got married.

To his old girlfriend?

No, he met a girl in Stanislawow. My father was very against it. Not the girl, but during the war, he thought his son shouldn't get married.

Was he older or younger?

One year older than me. But still he got married, he was very happy with her. The little boy they had, Harry was his name. Well, he died; he died from typhus.

How old was he?

About a year. I just loved him.

Do you remember his wife's name?

Yes. In Polish, Ruzzka. Baumgarten was her maiden name. My father could have gone to Russia and we could have survived in Russia, but my husband was very, very sick then and he did not want to leave us with the two kids and go.

THE DEATH OF BERTL'S HUSBAND

Was he in bed?

He had this heart condition, he couldn't walk around. He was very sick. His leg died on him slowly. Just before he died, his one leg got blue. I don't know, I don't think it was a stroke, it must have been more like a blood clot in his leg. It wasn't cut or anything, you know, just a blood clot. Then, I didn't know what it was.

My father, did not go to survive there, he just went to another smaller city. He thought it was better - about an hour from Stanislawow. I did not want to go, I wanted to stay there. I still stayed in the same room.

The Germans didn't come in right away. The Hungarian army came first. We were for a time with the Hungarians who were together with the Germans. But the Hungarians were not as bad as the Germans.

My husband died, just a day before the Hungarian army came into the city. He died Thursday night. I was all by myself at home. My brother took the children with him, you know, they shouldn't be around. Mr. Eisner was there. He died in bed. I couldn't get a doctor. I went in the street, I remember, I was asking everybody, "I need a doctor, where is the doctor!?" I went to this Dr. Klein, his wife answered the door. Dr. Klein was his doctor, and she says, "Everybody that was a Jew was afraid to go on the street already and he wouldn't come." In the same building where we were, there was a young couple visiting. He was a medical student. He came down and gave him a shot. He died anyhow. I sent my brother, to tell him. He came over with his father-in-law. Side streets, you know, people were afraid, Jews, to walk on the street.

Just at night or all the time?

No, all the time because the Ukrainian people who lived all over the city were very bad with the Jews, too. The Ukrainians were keeping with the Germans.

What date did he die, do you remember?

May, I don't remember the exact day.

But it was May, 1941.

Yes. Anyway, my brother's father-in-law was staying all night with me. My dead husband was in bed in the other room, and we were in the kitchen with my brother's father-in-law. The children were at my brother's.

Did they know?

The kids, yes. Next day was Friday. Lola (Lola and her daughter, Miriam, survived the war and live in the United States) lived just across the street from me so she came over with her husband. Her husband and my brother's father-in-law took my husband's body out from the bed. Put down some straw, and put the body on the floor. You know, the Jewish religion, you cannot lay on a bed, you have to lay on the floor. Anyway, Lola's husband and this Mr. Baumgarden, put him on the floor. My brother was trying to arrange a funeral. It was Friday. There was an old cemetery close by, ten minutes from us. But they did not have any graves anymore. You know, they did not bury anymore. They buried in the new cemetery, but it was too far to go to the new cemetery. They had

to carry him, because there was no horses or wagons or cars. There was nothing. The people that my brother went to, nobody wanted to go, they were all afraid. So we didn't know what to do. I said to my brother, "You know, go to the Rabbi." He was called the Burstyner Rabbi. This was a Rabbi, you heard about this, European, what people went to ask them questions anything. I don't know what you call them.

For advice?

Yes.

When I don't know what to wear, Bob always says, "Ask the Rabbi".

This was my father's Rabbi. My father was not a religious man, but he believed in this Rabbi. When my father had his bigger business, he always went to this Rabbi to talk, like somebody would go to a lawyer. Naturally, you send every month money. He was on his monthly list to send money. So I said to my brother, "You know, ask him what to do." We did not know what to do. So he went. The Rabbi sent his son to the people that do funerals, and told them to go, nothing will happen. Jews in Europe believed in the Rabbis, especially the religious Jews.

When the Jews came to the house. They had to wash him first in the house, because there was no other way. And the Rabbi says, "Let them take the children to the funeral." So we all walked with the children, one on one side and one on the other . . . and we walked to this old cemetery. When we were walking, the Hungarian army came there. They made room for the casket, they didn't stop us or anything. Like I said, they were much better than the Germans, no comparison. We were just lucky that the Germans didn't come in, that the Hungarians came in. But we buried my husband, Mano. My brother said, "How are we going to recognize the cemetery, his grave?" We didn't know what's going to happen later so he brought along a piece of wood, a stick. He had his name on it. He put it there, you know there was a little place, they didn't bury there for years in this cemetery.

Your parents weren't there?

No, my parents were in another city.

So they didn't know.

When we came home, we went side streets. When we came home, Lola and Miriam were already in my house. Lola had this little chair to sit Shiva. I remember she cooked for me hard boiled eggs.



Bertl & Lola



Bertl and her best freind Lola Indich
in 1979, los Angeles

Two days before he died, I had an operation on my hand. I took some suitcases to sell some clothes so, you know, to have money. And I got an infection in my hand. It was operated on. And so I was wearing my hand in a sling. Miriam stayed with me, because I couldn't take care of myself, and I couldn't take care of the kids. So Miriam, young girl, beautiful girl, with blonde braids hanging down, stayed with me about a week or two weeks, I don't remember how long. She loved meat, she was always hungry, always. Whenever you looked at her she was hungry. I had some potatoes, and one evening I made her some potato pancakes.

When my father was in this other little city, which was normally two hours by train from us. He heard that my husband died. He wanted to come and see what he can do for me. But then, we already had to wear arm bands with the Mogen David on them.

THE OCCUPATION STARTS

The Hungarians were there?

Yes. The Hungarians still were with us. So my father went and took off his arm band and took a train and came to Stanislawow. But on the train they recognized him and the Hungarians took him and put him in jail. It was a jail like, just like a room, you know. They had police and there were these bars on the windows. I didn't know and we already went to labor work like on the streets, sweeping streets and toilets and things.

One day, a man, a Jewish man, came and gave me a little note from my father. He threw it out from the window and this Jewish man picked it up and brought it to me. He wrote me, he's here in jail and I should bring him a warm blanket because they were going to send him to a concentration camp, and I should come to see him. So I went to where he was. It was downstairs, and he saw me from the street. I saw a Hungarian officer going in and he points and points to this man. He talked to me through the window and he says, "This is the man what can get me out." So I went in and I said I'd like to talk to the officer who is in charge. I had this blanket, the officer comes out and he says, "You want some bread?" So I said, "No, but my father is here." So I tell him the story. I am a widow, my husband just died few days ago and the two little children and my father came to see if he can do something for me. It was the truth, and he's here in jail because he was in the train. So he called me into his office and he brought me two breads. So, I said, "No, I really don't want the bread, I want to talk to my father." He says, "Yes, I will let you talk to your father." So I saw that I could do something with this officer. He was a very nice older man and he took me into jail to talk to my father. He said, "Give your father one bread," and I gave my father the one bread.

Is he the only one in the jail?

No, there was another Jewish man there. And my father said to me, "This is the man what can lead me out. Take something give him, and he will let me go, because tomorrow they send us to a concentration camp."

I went home. I had new ski shoes, you know the high shoes, brand new ones, from Germany, and a gold chain. I took this and I went back and went to this officer. I told him I didn't want to, what do you call it, "bestechen", bribe him, but I feel I'm responsible what is happening to my father because he came just to help me out. I have here, I would like him to have these boots. So he took it and he says, "One minute," and he went in and let my father go. So my father was out and he told him, "Don't go back by train."

So my father came to my house, this room I had, and he wanted me to go with him. To Kalusz, was the name of this city. I said, "No, I want to be in a bigger city. I don't want to go to a small city." He said, "How about if I take one of the kids with me, so you have it a little easier here?" I said, "All right." So he took George. He hired a wagon with horses and they took him back to the other city with George. I was with Bob, doing this labor work. We were busy, we didn't have time to think what could happen. I started to make business with this Hungarian officer. I sold him stuff, you know. All the silver that I had in the basket. I hid it in the cellar under the coal. I had to get rid of it, I was afraid. I wasn't allowed to have it, so Lola helped me. We went in the cellar and took it out and this officer bought it all, the silver, for 500 zloty. It was very little money.

I heard that they took my father away. The Germans came in, and the first thing they did, they took doctors, lawyers, teachers and the so called leaders.

There was no ghetto yet?

No, not yet. They got ready for it. They took my father away. My mother and George were by themselves. We had to go and pick them up. We could not travel by train. I had trouble with my back then already. I hired a truck because I know my father had a lot of stuff there, like flour and sugar. I hired the truck from the brewery. And this man drove me out to this little city. I didn't want to go without the arm band, so Miriam had a cape, so I put the cape on and the arm band on the bottom.

Your brother didn't go with you?

No, no, a man was very afraid. You know for a woman it was easier. I was at this time not like today.

We let the truck stand a little out of the city. I found a young man from the brewery, he worked in the brewery. He made himself some nice money, and he walked over to my mother. My mother was with George. The day before the German Gestapo came to the house and undressed her completely and took lots of her jewelry which she had on her.

I asked, "What happened to my father, what happened to him?" On the day that they took the people away, like doctors and lawyers and so forth. It was already over, the taking so to say, but my father was interested in a friend of his, if they took him, too. So he went across the street without even a coat, nothing, just a vest he had on, to see if this man was taken too. He was crossing the street, my mother was standing with George outside, and a Ukrainian policeman went by and he took him. We never saw him again. We took packages, they let packages into the jail, we took packages anyhow.

So anyhow, I came to my mother and here a German Gestapo came in to my mother's apartment. He called me outside and told me, "Look, I was here yesterday, your mother probably told you, don't you talk about this, what I took from her, with anybody." Because he kept it for himself. Then he left. My mother, the night before, she was afraid already, took the rest of the jewelry and put into the ground by a cousin. They buried it in a place there, so I had to go and take it out at night. We had to leave at night, because I wanted to take the truck so that I could take all the stuff from my mother. So the chauffeur, the young chauffeur, came with the truck. We had 100 kilos of flour and sugar and coffee and all this. Now we came to Stanislawow, also in the evening. We went to the back entrance of the apartment we were living in, to unload this stuff which we had, and everything went fine. My mother was with us, and George and Robert were there.

Now it started, they started to talk about the Ghetto. The Jewish Federation, which we had already, said the place they wanted to give us for the Ghetto was too small. They should give us more room. So the Germans said all right. The following Sunday, early in the morning, five o'clock in the morning or so, I heard screaming, "Schnell, schnell, schnell!" (fast). The Germans with boots, in the house and on the street, in the back too. I look out the window very carefully and I see people, Jews in underclothes and in nightgowns. The date was October 12, 1941. They didn't come to my apartment. The housemeister (manager), what cleaned the steps in the house there, he told them. The janitor, he told the Gestapo, when they were walking out already, "There is another Jew living here" and they came back.

I had dressed the children already, in their winter coats and boots because the rumor was that they were going to take us to another city. We did not take anything. When my husband died and the Germans came in, I had to hide my money and jewelry. Lola's husband told me what to do, where to hide it. He took a bucket and went far out from the city and had them make a double bottom. I could open it, whenever I have to, to take out something. And he told me, "You have it

by the oven when you cook". We cook with coal and wood, always to have ashes, and like a garbage can or so, always you have something in there, never leave it empty. And when I left for the cemetery, I didn't even take the bucket, nothing, not even a piece of bread.

THE CEMETERY AND MUCH HORRID DEATH

They were taking you to the cemetery?

They were taking us. I didn't know where. We came to the marketplace and here I see thousands and thousands of people. Sick and young and the very old and babies, and women that gave birth the night before to a baby . . . and my brother with his family and his child which was 6 weeks old, Harry.

We kept together, and he said, "Did you take the bucket?"

I said, "No, nothing, nothing not even a piece of bread."

He said, "Get out of here and go for the bucket, because they are taking us to another city and what will you live on." I'm afraid, I'm not going to go. I just was afraid.

Your mother was with you?

My mother, the two kids, my brother, his in-laws, my brother's wife, and the baby.

Why didn't you take it with you?

I really didn't think about it. I didn't even think. I'd rather take a piece of bread for the children, you know. Families with children they put on a truck. The other people were walking. There were all together about 15,000 Jews.

I didn't know the city, I didn't know where they were taking us, but my sister-in-law said, "They taking us to the new cemetery!"

We came to the cemetery early, first of all they took us early, second we went by truck, and we were pretty much in back by the fence. You know in Europe the cemetery are fenced in. In front of the cemetery where the main entrance is, they had like a little house. We came in, and I saw on this little house there was a machine gun, first of all, a man, soldier, Gestapo with a machine gun. The Poles and the Ukrainian people were digging big graves, long big graves. We were not allowed to stand up, we had to, not kneel down but, what do you call this?

Crouch.

Crouch, Susie, don't cry!

It's OK, she can cry.

We were standing there. We tried to keep all together. When they brought us in, one Gestapo brought all of us in one row.

Another young couple was with us and the Gestapo man said, "Whatever you have on you, jewelry, or money, you have to put it here."

There was a whole big mountain of stuff already. And if you don't do it - so this young couple was here. He took this man on the side and put the gun to his head and this will happen. And this man fell on the ground dead. Well, we didn't have anything. And we came and we were standing there,

crouching there, and people came and came and came. Then I saw Lola's brother with his wife and a little boy and her mother. I saw them, how they were taken to the grave and shot.

George wanted to go to the bathroom, so I said, get up a little bit, and just do it. So he got up a little bit and the Gestapo threw a stone at him. They were hungry and there was a man who had sugar. What you call it, cubes of sugar so he threw to the children a little bit sugar. Not only to my children, there were many, many children.

While I was standing there, crouching there, I said to my mother, "Where do you have this 500 zloty from the silver?"

She says, "Right here, in my dress with the pin."

I said, "My God, give it to me, but be careful."

And she gave it to me. While we were crouching I tore it and tore it and tore it in pieces and buried it in the sand there. This was enough, that they would shoot you for it when they find it.

They took the people and took the people all day. The people in the front, who came last, were first to die. When it was about 5 o'clock, it got dark, and it started, like rain and snow, a mixture of it. We heard that whoever is left can go home, but not through the main entrance, they had to go over the fence. So all of a sudden we felt that we were squeezed together. The Ukrainian and the Germans were holding hands around us, what was left. I think about 3,000 people were left, and they were squeezing us until one fell on top of the other, like a pyramid. I saw both of the boys falling to the ground. They were pulling on me I should pick them up, but I couldn't move a finger out of my position. I was falling to the ground on a heap of people.

I must have been on a child because a mother was tearing my hair and was screaming, "Murderers! You're killing my child!"

I had a dead person on my leg which hurt me so bad, it was so heavy, but I couldn't move my leg out. I must have fainted or something, because I don't remember what happened. The only thing I remember was the snow and the rain. The wet woke me up. I saw a young man reaching out with his hand and helping the people to get up, so I was reaching my hand too, and he helped me get up. I don't know how this dead man was moved off my leg. This man that helped me, was the son of the Rabbi which helped me to get the funeral for my husband. I was standing, the people were going to the fence to go over, to go home. I looked around and I couldn't find anybody. So I was sitting on a stone there, on a grave. I thought to myself, well, I'm not going to go home, I wait until I find somebody.

So all of a sudden I hear, "Bertl, Bertl," and it's my brother, "Come, we can go home." No, I can't go. I have to wait and see where the children are and where my mother is.

I saw them going home, he said, "Come, come . . . we are afraid they will change their mind and whatever is left they will finish up."

So I went home.

We came to my place, because this was closer than my brother's place and his little baby was alive. This six week old baby was alive. We came to the house, nobody there, nothing in the house. I had our fur coats in the bed, in-between the straw. We had straw mattresses. They didn't find them. The bucket was there! The bucket for the clean water wasn't there because we didn't have water anymore. The Germans closed the water on us. This bucket with the ashes was

standing there.

I remember I was sitting down by the stove in the kitchen, I really don't think we knew what we were doing. I think we were a little, just not there. Nothing, not a piece of bread, nothing for the baby, nothing in the house.

So I said, "Where are the children? Where is mother?"

I knew that my brother had told me at the cemetery, just to get me out of there.

Maybe two hours later, the door opens and mother comes in with the two kids. Dirty, they were actually with . . . stool, all over them, you know, in their clothes and everything. We asked mother what happened, she said that she had lost a shoe when they were squeezing the people together. She had lost a shoe, and she heard she could go home. She wanted to go home. So she looked for the shoe. She was looking down, and she saw a coat like Bobby's with the little belt in the back. So she picked him up. She saw its Bob, he had already like white stuff coming out of his mouth, you know . . . So she figured, when Bobby's here, the other one had to be close. She also saw them both fall together. And there was George! So she didn't look for the shoe anymore. I still cannot understand how she, with these two kids, could come over the fence. I don't know, I never found out. We never spoke about it.

We were very hungry. I went to this Ukrainian man, what probably took all of the stuff out of my apartment, and I asked him if he would have a piece of bread or something in the house for the kids. I washed them and they went to sleep, little Harry too. And we were just sitting around. My brother stayed, because he was afraid to go at night so far home.

[His wife was there?](#)

Yes, and the mother-in-law, father-in-law, all of them. Early in the morning, Lola came over. They were not in the cemetery.

Their manager of their building said, "There are no Jews in this house." They were all hiding all day. They knew something was wrong, because they could hear the shots going on all day. Many were not on the cemetery, Wujek (Wujek, means Uncle in Polish. He later was with us for the rest of the war. Bertl married Wujek. George and Bob called him Wujek. His name is Emil Brotfeld.) was not there. He was by Tadzik's (Tadzik was the husband of Zutka, who is Wujek's sister) parents. They were hiding there. Lola came in the morning and brought us some food.

After this cemetery day, they made the ghetto. There were 12,000 less Jews, and we had enough room! The Jewish Federation (Yudenrat) got a bill from the Gestapo to pay for the bullets which killed the 12,000 Jews.

THE GHETTO

In the ghetto I had a nice apartment, a room and a kitchen. My mother just liked to be by herself in the kitchen, no other people. The people had to take 3 and 4 families in one apartment with one kitchen. I paid \$100, that's a lot of money, for this apartment to an Italian guy. This building was his.

What happened to Mr. Singer? He was taken when you were taken?

Yes. Nobody came back from the building, from the house where I was living. All Jews were living there. I was the only one coming back.

You know you never told me, how you met Lola in the first place.

We were from the same city. She went to school in my city Bielsko. But she's older than I am. I knew about the family, but I met her in Stanislawow.

Just because she lived across the street from you?

Yes, and Regina was very friendly with her and so this was when we became very good friends. And we shared between us some food for the children.

Miriam (Lola's daughter) was in her late teens? She's about 10, 8 years older than Bob.

Miriam was born, I think, in 1928. Yes, 7 years older. And Lola had a son, too.

What happened to the son?

He was killed. He and his father, I mean Lola's husband.

After this, or before?

After. He was already on gentile papers.

So what did you want to know? Where was I then? We were living in the ghetto already, yes? We lived in this apartment building, a very nice building. My brother and his family were living on the first floor. We were on the third floor.

Was the building part of the ghetto?

Yes. Well, this is the reason we could live there. This was the only nice building in the ghetto. My brother was living in the apartment of his uncle. My brother, like I said, was on the first floor, by his wife's Uncle in one room. In the other room was Gierowitz (a friend of Bertl's and Wujek's, who survived the Holocaust and resided in California) with the uncle, because before he had the room rented by the family.

So that's how you met Gierowitz.

Right. You weren't allowed to have more than one room, and to share a kitchen with all the people. So in the third room, Wujek was with his sister. So we lived in one building.

Why was she in the ghetto, I thought she was living as a gentile?

No, no, the younger sister. Zutka was in Warsaw.

1937, Warsaw, Poland



Emil's sister, Zutka and
her husband Tadjuk Kuzminki

The younger sister was Paula.



Emil's sister, Paula Brotfeld
at the age of 20

Hope was named after her. Hope's middle name is Paula. This is how I met Wujek. In the evening, Gierowitz and he and my brother and my sister-in-law used to come upstairs. We used to play cards. This was how our love affair started!

Stanislawow, 1935



Emil Brotfeld at age 26, with his sister
Lonka Arak and her son Bumak

Stanislawow, 1937



Bumak Arak at the age of 12

We went to labor work, naturally, every day. I didn't have to go, but then my mother would have to go. So she was staying with the children at home and I went to labor work. I went with a group of girls. Four other girls, to clean apartments. The Jews had moved out, and we painted the apartments and we cleaned . . .

[Outside the ghetto?](#)

Outside the ghetto.

[How was this all arranged? I mean, when you say labor work, then they had a labor camp?](#)

No, they took the Jews what could work. What couldn't work they eliminated. What could work, they took in a group, a whole group in the morning, around 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock. I don't remember. They took the whole group out of the ghetto. And when they came back, they also came back in groups.

Then your mother didn't work.

No, she stayed with the children.

And they let her do that.

Yes, because one had to stay with the children. So, I went to work and she stayed with the children. I worked with the other four women cleaning the houses. German families were supposed to move in. It was very, very hard work. But it was good work because the people, peasants, came around with food. We could buy and we could trade and made a little business to take food into the ghetto for ourselves.

Did they allow you to do this?

NO! no. We took the food, and we carried it on our body into the ghetto like in my brassiere. Potatoes and you know, we found places to put it. Once they caught me with the stuff. One man went with a little stick on me and my body, and he saw that I have stuff on me. They took me to a certain place where they take people like this and the woman undressed me completely and found meat, a couple potatoes and four eggs. I was beaten up very badly by the Gestapo. But they let me go home. They had a book there and they wrote my name down. So in other words, whoever was in this book, when they are going to have the next killing, these people will be first. I was plenty scared. When I went out from there into the ghetto. The people in the Ghetto heard right away, it goes from mouth to mouth. They heard what happened to me, so Emil's younger sister came to look, if they going to keep me or if they going to let me out. I was pretty lucky - they did let me out. I came home.

There was another incident when I was working, cleaning these houses with the girls. Emil came there once. I was cleaning the apartment in this house from his brother-in-law. He knew where it was, so he came to look there and he saw me there on the floor working. His brother-in-law from his older sister's husband. They moved into the ghetto.

What was her name?

Lonka, the oldest sister. This was Lonka's husband's building, and Emil came looking. Then he saw me, how I was working. In the evening he came to us, upstairs. He said to my mother, "She is not going to work there anymore! This is terribly hard work and she's not going to work there anymore."

So my mother said, "Well, one of us has to work." I get her some other work. Emil was a man from the same city, Stanislawow. Thus, he had it much easier, and he could go in the ghetto, in and out whenever he wanted.

Why?

Because he had a job through a German, a civilian German. The German liked him very much, and he just gave him a passport.

What kind of work did he do?

He was overseeing people what was tearing houses apart, how would you say it?

Wrecking?

Wrecking, yes. But he didn't do it, he just was supervising. And this German brought into the ghetto to us food and wood. He was very good to us. We looked for him after the war, but we couldn't find him. He died, we later heard, in the war. What incident did I tell you there?

You said you couldn't work there anymore.

Yes. And so I really didn't go anymore. I had to go out of the ghetto. I couldn't just stay in the ghetto, you weren't allowed to. So he got me to be a translator in a place. Lola was working in a building that was called the Umschlagstelle. This is a building like, a shoemaker had one room, a dressmaker had one room, all these different kinds of professions, for the Germans, to fix stuff, sew stuff. Lola made brassieres and girdles for the Gestapo. She made girdles because every officer in the German army was wearing corsets, to have this slim waist. Did you know that?

You mean the men?

Yes, officers only. She really had lots to do with the Gestapo. It was very dangerous. So I was working with her - just to cover up that I was working. The group of girls what I worked with, once had this peasant come to trade with them. The Gestapo came in and caught them in the act trading stuff, and all four were shot on the place. It was two-three days after I stopped working.

So the girls were shot and you were lucky to be out of there and you were in an office?

Yes. I was with Lola, not in an office. It was the whole building, like I told you before, rooms with different kind of professions, and all of these people, watchmaker and . . .

Were you sewing?

A little, to show that I have a job, because Lola didn't need me. I went around and did some trading for food for both of us and selling a little, to get some food. Because this was the most important thing in the ghetto. We just didn't have any food. I came home, and my mother used to prepare whatever she could with what I brought. We got a little bread, in the ghetto, but it never was enough.

We had a woman, I give you an example, she was carrying water for us, you know, in the ghetto. Because like I said once before, the Germans closed the water up on us. We didn't have any water. We had to go to a valve like, to get the water. This woman carried the water for us and everyday she got more swollen and more swollen from hunger. So my poor mother, she used to leave her portion what she had for herself, and she used to give it to this woman. But she just dropped once, on the street. She dropped, just dead, from hunger, I saw her.

We were living there for a few months. One day, yes, this is also an important thing, they went from house to house, the Gestapo, with dogs, to see old people and how many children there are. They were going to take them away and probably kill them. We knew about it. My brother and Emil came upstairs and we had like, a little schpeizecabard, what is it called? You know where you keep your grocery stuff?

Pantry?

Pantry. An empty pantry. There wasn't much in there. We put mother and the two kids in there and we closed the door. We had wood, to get prepared for the winter. We put the wood all around the door of this wall. My brother went to his place and Emil went to his place downstairs, because

everybody must be in their own apartment. I was there by myself.

Where was your mother and the boys?

I told you, we put them in...

Oh, you put your mother with the children.

They were hiding in there.

But you didn't put the baby in with the children?

The baby wasn't with us - the baby was dead already. The baby got typhus. The baby didn't live anymore. He got typhus and died.

This Gestapo man came in with this big dog. Came into the kitchen, looked in the other room. The dog went to sniff on the wood. And I talked, you know, in German with him, doing my best to distract him, from the place there. He just asked me a few questions, I don't even remember what he asked me, and he went with the dog. I never, never can forget this because I was so scared. That the dog didn't smell . . . I cannot understand that the dog didn't smell that somebody's there. But I think the wood, the smell of the wood maybe did it. Well, the boys and mother survived!

The boys were quiet in there?

They knew that they better be quiet, believe me! They were on the cemetery, weren't they quiet? You didn't hear a peep out of them or any child. Babies you didn't hear a peep out of, not crying or anything. Because those that would cry, they would take them right away to kill. I told you that little Harry was alive. Afterwards, my brother was working in the ghetto, the Jewish police. They had Jewish police people in the ghetto, you know.

You mean, to keep law and order?

Yes. Keep law and order.

Or to spy?

No, no! To keep law and order. The Jews can fight together too. He didn't take this job, they gave him this job. You had to. Emil he was working. First, he was a translator.

This German man used to tell him, "Why do you stay here? Why don't you pick yourself up and go away?" He knew that Emil had a sister living in Warsaw and to try to escape all this. The Gestapo were taking people every night. There was a place, it was called the Red Mill. Mill, you know, what makes flour. And there, they were killing people every single night. Then we heard, that they are going to take away children. Children couldn't work, they were just in the way. We had already prepared gentile papers. We bought gentile papers. Money I still had. I had jewelry, and I sold every time something to this Italian guy what was the owner of the building. Gierowitz got me together with him and my best jewelry he took.

Did you still have your wedding ring?

Yes. The wedding ring was the last thing I sold in Warsaw.

I came home from work and both children were running to me in the ghetto, "We are so hungry, we are so hungry . . ." I always had hidden someplace a piece of gold or so. So I can buy something or exchange something. I had a little diamond ring. I went to a store and I gave them the diamond to give me a piece of bread. I couldn't stand to hear the crying of the hungry children. I still had the bucket, and I still took out from the bucket whenever I needed it. My mother had some too, different kind of jewelry. The fur coats, for instance, we had to give them up one day. I just didn't have the heart to give away the fur coats, so I burnt two of them in the oven in the evening at night. My father's coat, the men wear on the inside the fur, I wanted to have the material. My father was a very big man, so I could make for both of the kids suits. It is what I did. It was an English material. One night before Lola went with me to a German soldier and he, I gave him my, not Persian lamb, this flat fur, what is it called?

Broadtail.

Broadtail coat, and he gave me 100 cigarettes, I was smoking. Hundred cigarettes and a pair of ski shoes. This was, you know, you couldn't get this stuff for the fur coat. Of course, I had to give it up anyhow. I had to give something up because, people knew I had it, so I would have been afraid. I got something for my mother and for myself a jacket. Lola did the same. We went together, doing all these things.

Emil used to take jewelry from me, from his Aunt, and he used to sell it for us. He had more connections. He knew the people better, the gentile people, because he was from the city. He had one friend that went to school with him. He used to come and look at the stuff and bring the money and take the jewelry. And once he had a big diamond ring from my father and from himself. He went to work and this friend of his, a Polish one, came and looked at this stuff. A little bit later he said he would come back with the money. He sent the Gestapo there. And the Gestapo knew exactly where Emil kept it, in his pants pocket. He knew exactly where he has the papers, the gentile papers, in his socks. You know, the sock inside. He took all this away and put the gun to his head and he should come with him to the Gestapo.

Emil said, "No, I am not going to the Gestapo. You can shoot me here. I am not going to the Gestapo." Because the Gestapo they just would have beat him and then kill him anyhow.

So the man said, "Ah, I see you have guts, I tell you something. I let you be alive and you let me know whoever sells gold out of the ghetto and who has money and gold and so forth."

So, Emil was thinking a little, and said, "OK."

So he said, "All right, can you do it tomorrow?"

He said, "Tomorrow! I have to have more time, what will I have from it when I do it for you?"

"You will have, I give you (so and so many) percent." So he gave Emil a weeks time.

But he said, "Look, don't you try to run away because I always will have somebody by the station." He took away his papers too.

So Emil came home. He came upstairs to us. We knew already that we would get married. He told us what had happened. He had to go away and this very quick. It can take only a couple days. So I didn't know what to do. I know children will be taken away. So I went to the Rabbi. I went to this Rabbi for advice.

Surprised he was still alive.

Yes, he still was. Emil went with me, because I couldn't take my mother, I just...

So what did the Rabbi tell you?

Emil took me. We went to the Rabbi, and I asked him what I should do. I cannot take my mother along, because we were afraid so many people to travel. The Rabbi told me, "You can go. You take these two children and go, because your mother is older. The children are just now starting to live and your mother will come when she can. Arrange what you can, and she will come."

And he gave me to wear on my neck a Maria with a little child on her hand and he said, "Wear this all the time, wherever you go, you wear it." And we went home.

We decided. We found a woman, a Volksdeutsche. She was supposed to travel with me. I was supposed to go like a Volksdeutsche too, and Emil was supposed to go on other papers which he got quickly. Separate. On the same train but not together.

And your mother was going to your brother?

My mother was going to live with my cousin. I had a cousin still there. The night before we all moved to this cousin, because our house in the ghetto was not allowed to be in the ghetto anymore. They made the ghetto smaller. They took this building away. So my mother was with the cousin. She came in the morning when they took us out from the ghetto to work. Lola and Miriam took the two children out under their coats to go out from the ghetto.



Emil's Parents Jonas and Sara Brotfeld

ESCAPE FROM THE GHETTO

Oh my God . . . How could they do that?

How can I take children out from the ghetto?!

They had six or eight people in one row, and you know, the people were covering them. So they went under the coat like. This is how we went through. You did things like this - there was no other way. We came up to the place where Lola and I were working. There was a closet. We took the closet in the corner and we put the kids there. You know what I mean? Across like and the children went in the back of this closet to stay there. Not a closet in the wall, it was like European closets.

Like we have in the garage, freestanding.

Yes, but bigger. They were standing there all day. Or sitting there on the floor. Emil came there, too, in the evening. Everybody went back to the ghetto and we stayed on, in the building. This woman, Volksdeutsche woman, sent her husband to pick us up from there. There was a man, Jewish man, in the evening he watched this place. He slept there always so he knew. He let us. Naturally we give money to these people, he let us out. We had some of our suitcases and clothes. We had already take to this woman, from a few days before. We couldn't have any baggage when we walked the street. And we came to this woman. We took a train. I don't remember, the same night or the next day.

You and the Volksdeutsche lady and...

And the two kids. We went in one wagon, this was only for Volksdeutsche. They had a special wagon. Wujek was in the next car, where all the Poles were. We had to change trains, in one place. We were waiting for the other train in this city. They took out from the city all the Jews on this one day when we were sitting there waiting. We saw all these Jews are taken out from the city. In another city we waited by the station for the train and always Wujek was separate, and I was sitting with the children.

You didn't even act like you knew him?

No, no. Before we left from Stanislawow, I still had some jewelry and I had a little watch from my husband, a little pocket watch. And I said, "You know what, take this watch, you carry it."

He said, "No! I don't want to. I don't want to, you have it."

I said, "No, take it. Maybe something will happen on the way."

He took it. Emil took it. And as we were sitting on the station waiting for the train, and I see from far away a policeman. Militia, it was called, comes to Emil and takes him away. I don't know anything. I cannot move, I cannot look. I cannot show them that I know him. I said to this woman, "You know what, we have to go back. I don't have anybody to go to in Warsaw. I don't know anybody."

You didn't know where you were going.

I didn't know where I am going. I don't have an address. I want to go back to the ghetto.

She said, "I'm not going to take you there."

Because she was afraid. She said, "You go to Warsaw, and then you see. When you want to come back, you come back, without me." She just wouldn't do it. The train came, and we went into the train.

My name was Wanda. I heard somebody calling, "Wanda, Wanda!" Wujek was in the other train. But he told me later, this Ukrainian policeman took him to a German police, not Gestapo, but police. From the Gestapo he never would have come out, and left him there. Told him this is a Jew, he knew him from school and he was trying to run away. So, he left, and the German said to him, "You have papers?" He showed him the papers. He said, "On these kind of papers, you really wouldn't go far. These are very bad papers." Well, he told him the story that he had other papers but they were taken away. He said to him, "Look I don't want to beschtesien", this means, he wanted to give him the watch to go out...

Bribe.

"I don't want to bribe you. I should like to give you this watch, you should know you saved a life." And he took it. He said, "You wait here with me, when the train comes, then I put you on it." This is luck, what we had. When the train came, he put him on it. Then when I heard him calling Wanda, I knew that he was there. So I was lucky I didn't go back.

We went to Warsaw. We went to a hotel with this woman and the kids, and Emil went to his sister.

You didn't really have a problem because you didn't look Jewish.

That's right.

But the boys...

The boys, yes. And the problem was with George. But in the long run, you know, I told you we bandaged George always, his head and his eye.

I thought you shaved his head?

Yes, but still his eyes gave him away - black eyes. Bob, we made him blonde, you know.

Bleached.

Yes, he really didn't look too Jewish, Bob didn't.

Didn't it turn red, his hair?

No, I don't think so, but I don't remember. Not red, no, he was blondish.

Emil's sister wasn't very happy that he brought there, a woman with two children.

She didn't know that he was coming with anybody; she didn't know that he was coming, period!

That's right. And then here are two children and her two sisters were there in the ghetto. See, his younger sister gave me her papers.

She wouldn't go or what?

She wanted to go, but since Emil had to go away and he wouldn't go without me, so she just was unselfish enough to give me the papers.

Gierowitz came to pick me up from the hotel with my brother-in-law. And they took us to Zutka. The woman went away.

Wait, Gierowitz went with you?

No, Gierowitz was before us in Warszawa, with gentile papers. Wujek gave him the address from Zutka. But later he ended up in a concentration camp, because they recognized him on a train. He went to save some Jews from a ghetto, to take them out, and they recognized him and took him to Auschwitz.

He wasn't married yet?

No.

LIVING AS GENTILES

We came to Zutka, we had to think about a name. So we took a telephone book, I just opened the telephone book and there was the name, Kaminska. So we decided on the name Wanda Kaminska. Well, we got papers.

The next day Bob got sick. Fever, high fever, all night. We knew he was very sick.

[This was in 1942 or '41?](#)

42. He was 7. He was with a high fever, and all night we were waking him up. What is your name? What is your name? We had to make him remember his new name! Robert is fine in Polish, but the Kaminska. So he finally said it with the fever. The next day we knew we have to call a doctor. Calling the doctor was very dangerous, so Zutka was thinking about a woman who was not far away, a woman doctor. She called her to the house. The doctor examined him and, naturally, she saw right away that he was Jewish because in Europe the gentile boys were not circumcised. But she didn't let on that she knew.

Very nice woman, and she said, "Well, he has typhus. We have to put him in a hospital. You are not allowed to keep him at home."

So, I said, "No, I can't do that."

She said, "Look, I put him in the hospital and don't be afraid."

She still didn't tell me she knows; she never did tell us that she knows we are Jewish. And she said, "Instead of fumigating here, this house, they will fumigate my office."

"I will tell them you came from out of town to my office." This is what we did. I was most afraid that we shouldn't put Zutka into a real problem. You see when they will catch us and if they fumigate Zutka's apartment, then they would know that we fit together somehow. So the doctor did this for us.

And the doctor took him. We went to the hospital with her, and she must have told the doctors, or they saw themselves. When I came to the hospital the next day, I said, "I wish he should write me a little note, just with his name on it." I wanted to know if he knows his name. If he said Geminder, then we are goners! So he (takeh) wrote Robert Kaminski with this high fever. And the doctors were so good to us, because they knew. They let me go into this big room, there was one big room with all these...

[Contagious people.](#)

Yes, they put an apron on me, I had my head in a mask, and they let me in to him. I brought him applesauce every day. Zutka made applesauce every day. She went with me, but she couldn't go in with me. I talked to him, and when Bob was better, he was so helpful to the nurses and to the sick people. They were sorry when he got healthy, that he had to go. He came out from the hospital. I really don't remember how long he was there.

We had already a little room by some people around the outskirts of Warsaw. The landlord was working on the train. What is it called? The guy what shovels the coal in. Anyhow, not the conductor. And we had a room there. In this same room we had a little stove; a small stove that you put wood or coal in, to cook, and there was the toilet in the cellar. There were wooden steps

down to the toilet. Anyhow, this was always a big question if we can go down there because we were afraid somebody shouldn't observe you there. This man and this woman, older people, they knew we were Jewish, but they didn't let on. And we let the boys go with their kids, with their grandchildren. They had a daughter and grandchildren. We let them go with them, you know, to play outside. We said to everyone that we went away from Warsaw with the kids because of the bombing.

George went once to the bakery with the other boys to buy bread. Not to the store just directly to the bakery, you know. And he comes in and this baker says to him, "My you have such nice eyes, like a Jew." So he came home to tell us this. This means we have to leave already. So this man that we lived, he knew about it too because the other kids heard it, his grandchildren, and he came to us and he said, "I find you a place on the other side of Warsaw." And he did. Because he was with the train, you know, so he found us another place, and he even brought us all our stuff which we had. This little bit which we already had, pots to cook in, brought us to the other place, and we had another room.

We just sold everything, I sold my wedding band, I sold my shoes, whatever there was to sell. There wasn't any more. Zutka helped us out as much she could. When it was a holiday, and naturally, we couldn't be with her, so the next day she would come and bring us stuff what they had that we should have something good to eat.

We just couldn't make it anymore, we were sleeping in the woods and we didn't have where to stay, so I decided...

[I thought you were in that room?](#)

Yes, but we had to go out again because somebody was recognizing us. It just wasn't good. We just couldn't make it, and we were thinking of suicide. But I wanted these children to survive. I knew I had relatives in the United States, so I said I'm going to go to the city from where my husband was, Wieliczka. This little city was by Krakow. And there was a man, an engineer, I forgot his name. We used to help him, he was hiding by the Russians, so we helped him. So I figured I will go and see if he can help us. So I went.

I stayed in Krakow by the bus. I was waiting for the bus to go to Wieliczka, which was an hour or so. Who is standing there, this man that I was going to see, this engineer, he recognized me. We did not let on. He knew I was Jewish. I told him that I just wanted to go see him. We were on the side there talking and he told me I should come to his house and his wife is there. I mean they didn't know so much, but they knew I was Jewish. And he knew that we had property, houses. I told him, "I would like he should take the children, and after the war one of the houses will be for him." I make a contract with him. He should see the children should be safe, because I can't do it anymore. So he said to me, "No," he cannot do it because he's in the city and they know him too well, but he will find a place out of the city, like on a farm. There will be better food for them. He has a woman in mind and she would do it.

[What was his name, do you know?](#)

No. I do not. The woman's name I know. The woman's name was Grochal. He took me to this woman. She was a very pretty woman with a husband. They had a farm. She was making business, you know, black market business and so on; but my engineer friend knew that she likes money. Money, I didn't have, but she would go for something like this, and he went and told her the story. She said, "Yes!" And we make between us and the husband a little contract. If she keeps the children till the end of the war, this and this house will belong to her. She told me to go and get the children. So I went home.

On the way home, I bought some apples. A few crates of apples, so that I could make a little bit of money, to have some money to go to the train. I think Zutka was with me, I think so.

FAMILY SEPARATION

And I came home and I got George ready. George was first to go. George was the one that we had the most trouble with, because he looked a little more Jewish than Bob. I had a little suitcase for him. We had to be at the station around 8 o'clock. The train ran at 12 o'clock, to Krakow from Warsaw. You weren't allowed to walk in the street after 8 o'clock so I had to be by the train station before 8 o'clock and you had to buy a place card for the seat for the train. I came into the station, I put George in a corner sitting on this little suitcase. He was nine years old.

I was staying in line to get this place card, and here a man came over to me. The guy that carries the suitcases, the porter. A drunken, a Polish guy, and he said to me, "You are Jewish!"

I said, "Get away from me, don't bother me, you had too much to drink." And he goes away and he comes back and he comes back and he comes back.

"There is your child, there is this little boy? And I'm going to send the Germans here."

I said, "If you don't go away I will go to the Germans and I will tell them they should get you out of here because you are drunk." And the German, it was Polish police actually, but was working for the Germans, came to me, the Volksdeutsche police. He came to me, a young man, "Are you Jewish?"

I said, "Are you going to believe this drunk? He doesn't even know what he's talking about!"

"Where are you going?"

I said, "My mother's sick in Krakow and I'm going to visit her, she's dying and I'm going to visit her."

So he said, "But you are Jewish." My Polish was so bad, like his. He was also a Volksdeutsche from Schlesia, from where I came and they speak a little bit different dialect.

He said, "You know what, you come with me across the street here to a hotel and I bring you to the train safely and you go to see your mother with your child."

I said, "How can I do it now when I have my child here? I make a date with you when I come back."

He said, "All right, I get you the place card, and I get you into the train."

"You look around you," he said, "You see these are all civilian Policemen which watch people like you are. But I get you into the train safely. Remember, when you don't look me up when you come back, you better never come to this station anymore because I'm always here."

So what do I have to lose? I had to do it! So, he got me the place card, and he put us in the train and then he is walking out and he said, "You see this man right in back of you? See this man in back of you? This is all police, watching you, but nobody will touch you because you are going with me." And George was white like a sheet. We were sitting in the train, it was cold, freezing outside. We came to Krakow.

So then what happened?

We came to Krackow, early in the morning, and went to the bus station. We took a bus. We had to walk after we came to Wieliczka. Wieliczka was the town where my first husband and some of the Geminders were born. His family lived there, near Wieliczka.

Was that near Krackow?

It was about one hour by bus from Krackow. It was known in Europe, because there were salt mines. And when we came to Wieliczka, it was bitter cold. It was so cold, and we had to walk not knowing where to go. George and I walked through the fields and we came to this woman, or this family, where he was supposed to stay.

Where was Bob then?

Bob was home in Warszawa with Wujek. I couldn't take both, it was very good that I didn't take both.

We came there, to a nice little house. I knew her already because we made a contract. Her name was Grochalova in Polish.

So, you did leave George with her?

We had nice fresh hot bread with real butter. And they had a pig and chickens and they had, I think they had a cow, but I'm not sure (Yes, they had a milk cow). They make their own butter. Oh and it was so warm and beautiful in this big kitchen. I told her, "I see no possibility to bring Robert because I can't travel with him anymore." She was nice; she was a business woman. She went from the business standpoint, she said, "I go with you to Warsaw, and I take him."

The next day, I left George, I said good bye. The woman and I went together to Warsaw. We went to another station, just in case the German should be on duty, that he shouldn't see me. By the way, I saw him once more. I went with Emil on the street and by the station, just far away, he was standing there and I showed him to Emil. I said, "This is the guy. So lets go far away." So we went fast, so that he shouldn't recognize me.

Do you think he really expected you to come back?

I'm sure he thought so. I don't think he would have let me go. It just was plain luck again, which I had a lot.

Well, she went with me to Warsaw and we went with a train home. This little town, where we lived, was called Dzeran. There was a train which went from Warsaw to all these little cities.

We walked. From far away, I saw by the window already Robert and Emil. We come in the house and there was a pot on the stove with potatoes. Bob was in bed.

I said, "What's the matter is he sick?" No, but it was so cold in the room so he just let him stay in bed, because he didn't have any coal to make the room a little warmer or cook the soup.

Emil went to the woman that we rented from, very nice people. They knew we were Jewish, but they didn't let on. Their name was Truskolawski. Yes, he went to her and said that I came back from a trip with a woman. "Can she lend us a little bit coal." She did, and so we cooked the soup and Bob got dressed. I got him his little suitcase ready and she took him. Took him to the train.

We made up with her, when something went wrong that she would send me a telegram.

In about four weeks I got the first telegram: I should come. So I went.

I had to take George home because she took him to church like all the other children. She said these were children from the relatives and they were away from the city because they are bombing the city, so the mothers send the children to her. I had to take George because when he went to church, instead of taking off his cap, he put on his cap. So the people were talking: "It must be a Jew."

I went to pick up George. I took him home. We already were living in another house in another room, by some other people.

Why did you move?

We had to move from there because the people started talking. "We must be Jews." Mr. Truskolawski, he worked on the railroad. He came to us one day and said, "We know that you are Jewish, and we feel that you are in danger here because the people are talking. So, we hate to do it, but I think, I have grandchildren and I am afraid when they come and find you." The same would happen to us, they would kill all the families there.

He really was nice. He knew we didn't have what to eat or to drink. So in the evening, he invited us into his apartment just to have something with us to eat and drink. But he knew that we really needed to move. And he took all our belongings, the little we had and said, "You don't have to worry about it; I have found you a place and I bring the stuff to you there."

He even came to visit us. He felt that when some gentile people come to visit, they wouldn't think that we are Jewish.

I brought George back to a place where we had one room in a house by ourselves. The place was Mienzelesze. I also had trouble there later on. And yes, we started to make cigarettes.

This was still in Warsaw?

Yes, around Warsaw, not in the city.

1943, Warsaw, Poland



Bertl, Emil and George
in front of the room where the family lived



Emil and George at age 10,

Like a suburb?

Suburbs of Warsaw. We started to make cigarettes already. I don't know how to explain. We bought tobacco. In Europe they had these papers like with a filter. You had a little hand machine in which you put tobacco. Then with the wood you put it in, like a plunger. I cannot explain it. And, by making cigarettes, we already started to have a little money. Emil and the boys used to make the cigarettes, and I went every morning to sell the cigarettes, into the city, with this little train what went to Warsaw.

Did you package them?

Yes. We packaged them. The paper what you fill comes in a box and we put them back in the same box.

I came to the station to wait for my train. There was a woman who lived in the big house. We were living in the small house with only one room. She was spitting in front of me and saying, "What a gentile keeping Jews and children." So naturally, we were a little bit afraid, but we just didn't have anywhere to go. We just had to stay. And George was back. We found a place for George by a woman, she kept Jewish children. An older couple, not far from where we were living. We paid her so-and-so much a month and she kept him there. He was making cigarettes. He couldn't go outside or anything, he was always in the back room.

Were there other children with him?

There were a few other children, but they had to go away later, so she only kept George. By the way, later on, the Polish Militzia came there, and he jumped out from the window because he heard them. He went to a nun's, what is it called?

A convent.

Convent. George had made it up with the woman that if something should happen, he should do that and he was there over night. The next day the woman picked him up, but they came again. And when they got George they beat him up. From this time on, he was stuttering. And the woman begged and begged with these men, I think two or three. They wanted to have the address where the parents lived. George didn't even know where we lived.

So he didn't stay with you at night either?

No, he stayed with the woman. He stayed with her all the time, in the room. He had it good there, he had food. He was making the cigarettes. Emil went twice a week to pick up the cigarettes from him. So he saw him. I very seldom went there.

These men wanted money from us. So she said, the woman, I don't remember her name, she said, "I get you the money just let him go." So they did. She contacted us and we gave her the money. They made up to meet by the railroad station in Warsaw. She went to the railroad station to give them the money. These people didn't come, these two men, didn't come to the station to pick up the money. She gave us the money back, and we took George, I think a week later. We took him back with us because already the Polish people didn't look especially for Jews. They had their own problems, the Poles, with the uprising.

We come later to the uprising.

So, now let's go back to where we were living near Warsaw. This man came to us and said he can get me, a "kenkarte" it was called. You could not go on the street without this . . .

Identification?

Yes. You just could not go around the block without it. And he told me that my identification is very bad. He told me that he will get me identification. I will go to the place to pick it up.

To the office? The railroad station?

Yes. To the office where people get this "kenkarte". I will pick it up myself and it will be, so to say, an original.

It wasn't dangerous for you to go out, to pick it up?

Well, he told me it was not. I needed it badly, so he did it for me. But in the meantime I got another telegram. I got a telegram to come again to Wieliczka, to pick up Bob. I couldn't go, I did not have any papers. And you couldn't go without papers. You weren't allowed to go on the train without it. So I had to wait about three months until I could go and pick up my papers. I told her about it in a telegram. These times you couldn't call, she didn't have a phone in her little house. She wanted to save Bobby. The people were talking, so she hid him in an attic. She was hiding him in an attic.

I don't understand. How could you just tell her in a telegram that your papers were no good?

Well, I didn't tell her my papers were no good, I just told her I cannot come. She was very smart. She knew that I just cannot travel. Matter of fact, I travelled once, I don't remember exactly, if it was when I went to pick up Bob or if it was when I went to find this friend of ours, that I travelled with a girl about my age, gentle girl. We were sitting all night together. When a train or a bus came to a main station like Krakow was, the Gestapo was very often around the train. Not just for Jews, for the Poles, and picked up people which were able to work. Young people, and send them to Germany for labor work, many Poles. Yes, picked them up off the train. And we talked about it with this girl. She said to me you know when something should happen to me, here is my address, let my mother in Warsaw know that they took me to Germany. I said, why don't you do the same, when they should take me, let my husband know that they took me to labor work.

She didn't know you were Jewish?

No. We came to Krakow, and there around the train was the Gestapo. We came out and they picked us out, you know, young and strong looking and they took us, we were walking to a bus to be sent to Germany. I had a package, like you put on your shoulders, backpack. And while we were walking, a young German soldier walked near me. He helped me to carry this backpack. Well, I spoke German and I said to him, you know, it's really a shame that they are going to send me to Germany. I don't mind to work, but I'm going to visit my mother and she is dying, and I really wanted to see her for the last time. We were staying and waiting to be put in the bus, the autobus. All of a sudden I hear Verschwid - this means disappear. So I went around him and I disappeared. And I let the girl's mother know what happened to her.

This was very lucky!

Have you ever thought about how important it was that you had red hair?

Well, it was important that I did not look Jewish, naturally.

I'm sure being pretty made a difference, too.

That I spoke German, that made a big difference, too. Even by the station when I spoke to this man, Polish, he said, "From where are you? You are not from around here, Warsaw." I said, "No, I come from Overshleizen, around there." He said, "I come from the same city! So we were already landsmen, because my Polish was bad. It still is, but it wasn't like somebody from Warsaw or Krackow. I went to German schools, and I only had once a week a Polish lesson in school.

So, where was I? I could not go to Krackow to pick up Bob. And I had to wait three months. I got my papers. I got original, beautiful papers. You could not buy these when you were a millionaire.

How was he able to arrange this?

On the underground, they were able to arrange many, many things. I was in so many incidents with the underground. I saw what they did on the streets. It's not believable. I do not want to get into this because we will not finish in a year.

No, you should tell us. Tell us everything!

I went to sell the cigarettes to a woman, an older woman, in Warsaw. They had these little booths outside on the street. You must have seen them, kiosks, and there, they sold cigarettes. And I became good friends with this older woman and her daughter. I came and she let me sit a little bit, rest a little bit. Sometimes she gave me a cup of tea.

I was sitting once inside with her and all of a sudden we heard shooting. An armored car was going with money and the underground went with horses and wagons and they went in the way of the truck. The truck couldn't go by. And shooting started. The underground took all the money and off they went!

Like a movie.

Like a movie, you're right! And we were sitting there with this woman and she told me, "All the Jews are doing this, only the Jews are doing this." And I said, "Oh yeah, they are bad." She said to me, "Do you know that the Jewish women," how can I say this? How can I say this, I don't know. "like go sideways, not like ours." I looked at her, I said, "I think I know about it too."

I want her to be my friend! This is just one incident that was with the underground.

ROBERT HAS TO COME BACK

I went to Krackow and I went to Wieliczka to pick up my son, Robert.

This was about six months after you left him there?

It was about five or six, I don't remember. For three months, she was hiding him. Like I said, this woman was a business woman. She was a good woman, but she was always on the go. She was in the black market; she sold and bought and so forth. She had a maid at home and her husband, he was a nothing. She had a son about George's age. I don't remember the name - Bob remembers his name very well, because sometimes he wasn't so nice to him.

He said that he used to taunt him, tease him and taunt him.

Yes. Anyhow, I came to pick up my boy and she took me up to this attic. There was first the hall, in the little farm house. Then there was, where the pig was, the pig sty. Then there was a little ladder going up to where they kept hay, the loft. And there was a small little window, an opening. This was all, you know, looking out on this road or street. I went up there and here was this boy with long hair, and lice. I shoved those lice off him with both my hands. He actually was talking to his shadow . . . to his own shadow. I took him down, she cut his hair and we gave him a bath. She gave him different clothes, from her son. She gave him clothes so he can go home.

So I asked her, naturally, what had happened. She told me the people started talking. She had him with her relatives for a short time, then she had to take him back. They were afraid. They should not catch Bob and catch them too, because they would have been killed too. So they put him in this attic, and the maid was supposed to take care of him. The maid forgot that he was there.

And Bobby then told me, that in the evening, when he heard that she had fed the pig already and there was another dish from the cat. The cat came in there to eat, so he went slowly down this ladder and he picked out some food what was left there. Sometimes the chicken came up in the attic and laid an egg, and so he took the egg and he drank the raw egg. And there was a pear tree in front of this little window, so at night when it was dark, he went up in the window and tore a pear from the tree. He said very often he wanted, there was a hatchet, so he said, he wanted to take the hatchet and put it in his stomach, but he was afraid it would hurt, so he didn't.

They didn't feed him at all?

Once, she put on the steps a little bowl there for him. Only he wasn't washed, he wasn't nothing in three months. When we came home, to Mienzelesze, this new place. He was playing with his shadow. I never thought that he would be a normal person. But, God is good, and so look at him today!

It's amazing!

Naturally, the contract we made with this woman, was for nothing, because she could not keep the children there.

They made cigarettes, Bob and Wujek. And George and I went every day, and I sold the cigarettes. But we just couldn't stay there because this woman by the train station pestered me too much. She knew that I was Jewish. We were washing outside, you know the woman what rented us this room, was washing outside on this board, what is it called?

Washboard.

Washboard, I had to wash too. So I washed after she finished, because all the soap and stuff she let me use. So when I took this big sheet I didn't know how to twist it the right way, so I took it like the Jewish way, she told me this woman, "This way - you supposed to twist it, the other way. You don't know this either."

I never knew there was a Jewish way to twist a sheet!

Right. So when she saw me on the station, she would spit again and say I'm Jewish too because I even don't know how to wash a sheet. Well, we just had to move out, and we moved. George was by this woman. Bob was with us. We bleached his hair, he was blond. And there was no trouble with him. I mean the people would not recognize he was Jewish.

He had such fair skin.

Yes. We went to another place, Wonsiak. I think the man from the underground helped us find this place. The man what rented us the place, was a shoemaker.

We looked him up a couple years ago. I think I told you. We went there, and we looked him up. And he recognized us. We went to his house and he opened all the ham and everything he had in the house, poor guy. We left him some money and we send him a package from America, but we never heard from him again. I think he cannot write.

Does Zutka ever see him?

No, no this is too far for Zutka to travel today. She was an old woman.

So, anyhow there we had in his house a room. When Christmas came, we put the biggest tree in the window, and left the window open. Everybody should see the beautiful tree! See, your husband (Robert, Judy's husband) had a Christmas tree when he was little!!

And Emil's name, the first name when we went out from the ghetto, his name was Chlebowski. Brotfeld means bread field; so he picked a name what is close to his name, so to say. Then he had to change his name.

Did he keep the first name, Emil?

No. Janek was his first name. His next name was Dombroski because they got him once you know, that's another story too, but I can't go into it. And then he had to change his name because he went to the Warsaw with me. I had to buy a little more tobacco, so and I had to travel. It was a little dangerous, you know. Even a Pole wasn't allowed to do this, so I usually bought more and left it by his sister.

Where did you buy tobacco?

On the market, on the black market. But they let you do this. It wasn't dangerous. And then I bought it, and I left some with Zutka, Emil's sister, and some I took home. We needed more, business was good, so sometimes he went with me to the city.

Did you see Zutka very much?

Every day, when I went to the city, because I stopped in her house after I sold and bought the tobacco. I stopped in her house to have maybe something to eat or sometimes to take some food home. You know when it was a holiday, she always saved some goodies for us, and I took it home. Or even sometimes they came to see us. So the people should see that gentile people come to visit us.

Once we went, Emil went with me to the city. We were sitting in the street car. We never went together. He was sitting separate. Because when they get one, they shouldn't get the other one. And he felt that someone is looking at him, and he walked off the street car and this guy went after him. It wasn't a German, it was a Polish man, in plain clothes, a Polish . . .

Plain-clothes-man.

Plain-clothes-man, thank you. He went down some steps, I went down too. And from far away I looked, and they went some steps down and there they started talking. I saw that he went into his pockets. Emil took from one pocket money out, you know we had money to buy tobacco, and gave it to him. And he said, "Don't you have more?" And he looked in the other pocket but he never went back in this one pocket where Emil had the big money. The smaller money was on the outside, and he took the smaller money. And he took the money and let him go. Mostly the Poles, when they thought somebody is Jewish, mostly they wanted money. So he went, and I went far back after him. We went up to his sister and then he counted how much money he had left. So he had the bigger bills left. This was one incident.

The second incident he had when he went to Warsaw with me. We got out from the street car to go to his sister. Together we went on the street, and we felt somebody is in back of us. Yes, two men, again Poles, and they took us in a house and they asked him if he was Jewish, and he had to put his pants down. They saw that he was Jewish. And again, they just wanted money. He gave them money and they let us go. But we didn't go to Zutka right away because we were afraid they would come after us and see where we went.

We went to another street car, and we went around Warsaw for two hours maybe. When they should be around us, they should lose us. Then we went up to Zutka. This was pretty bad because everything we had they took away from us. These were two incidents.

He went very seldom with me into the city. And now coming back, we were by this man, Wonsiak.



Bertl and Emil went to visit Wonsiak
in Poland in 1984.

"Wosniak was a shoemaker and he helped us to survive"

His name was Wonsiak? That means mustache.

Yes. And we had the biggest Christmas tree. And we had to move out. I don't recall what it was, why we had to move out. They needed the apartment, it was a nice place, instead of one room, we had two rooms. But this woman where George was, had a little house very close by, just one big room, nothing else. A toilet naturally. So she rented us this room, and this is where we stayed. It was very good, because there were no neighbors. It was on the field, just one house. I don't think I should call it a house. I don't know what to call it. It was just something with one room. Anyway, from there I always went to the station and I did not have trouble there.

One morning, I went to the station and on the way I saw that somebody is covering up graves, just across from us. So, I stopped, and I wanted to know what happened. They found Jews there, four people. They took them outside, in front of the house, the Gestapo. They made some graves, and they shot them right there.

I went back home, and I told Emil what had happened. We didn't know that the people were Jewish. One Jew didn't know from the other one because you were afraid of Jews too. So, we felt we should move out of there again. We looked around, to see if we could find something, but you couldn't find so fast.

One day, it was a few days later, I wasn't home. I went to sell cigarettes in Warsaw. I came home from Warsaw, and I saw Emil and Bob on the field there waiting for me. I knew something was wrong. They told me that Wonsiak came to them and told them that he knows that we were Jewish. He was at the police station because he wanted to build a house or something, build to his house. He heard them talking that today in the afternoon, they will go and look where these Jews were killed, as on this street some other Jews are living. So he bought them some whiskey, the police people, and he went away to tell Wujek. His name then was Sokolowski. He changed again his name. He told him he should right away walk out and he will pack all the stuff we had, a little

pot already to cook in, some other clothes, and he will take it to his house and then bring it where ever we lived. So he came to wait for me that we cannot go to the room anymore. And we heard later that the police came in the afternoon to this house to look for Jews.

We found a place in, not far from Warsaw, Praga, it was called. Warsaw was divided in two places, Warsaw and Praga. It was a good place. We had to walk to a street car, not anymore to a train.

Was it better to go on a street car than a train?

Yes. I didn't have to wait for the train, I knew when the street car was coming I was there, there wasn't so many people.

How did you find a place?

This man Wonsiak, helped us to find a place. The other one, the underground man helped us find a place. And this how we find the places. And Zutka helped us to find places.

We were staying there and Emil went twice a week to George. George was pretty far now from us, I mean maybe 45 minutes walking. He went twice a week to pick up the cigarettes that George was making by this woman.

One time the Polish police wanted to know where we lived from George, the address of the parents.

I said in the beginning, when I left the ghetto in Stanislawow, I went to the Rabbi, and he gave me a coin to wear on my neck. I think I said this story. And I remember once I forgot to put it on, this chain with a picture. They couldn't wait until I come home. They were sure I never come home because I went without it.

We took George to stay with us. Anyhow, one day we went to the street car, Emil went with me, to go into the city. To sell cigarettes. We waited and waited by the street car. The street car didn't come, we saw something is wrong. We didn't know what. They were talking about, what is it called, "postania", uprising. The uprising in Warsaw. So we waited for the street car, and we knew something was wrong.

Emil said, "You know what, let's go back and take the children." And this was one good thing, really, because we never would have been able to come back for the children. We went back and we took the children.

They were very happy to go to the city. We started walking to Zutka, to his sister. On the way, we saw already that people were not on the street. They were hiding in their houses. Whenever we heard something going on, we were running into a house and hiding until the shooting stopped. We walked, we walked, all day.

THE WARSAW UPRISING

People let you in?

Not into a little house. We walked into a hall into a house, an apartment building. When you wanted to live in the city, you didn't live in small house. You had to live in an apartment. When you lived out of the city, there were the small houses. Like when we were living out of the city there, we had the small houses, or rooms in the small houses.

So we walked all day, and in the evening we came to Zutka. We knew already on the way that the uprising started. Then Zutka wasn't afraid that she kept Jews because nobody bothered to look for Jews. They had their own troubles. We stayed with Zutka, more in the cellar than in her apartment. She lived on the third floor.

And one day she said, "Let's go upstairs." We were sleeping in the cellar. "Let's go upstairs and dust a little bit." So, we went upstairs. We did a good job cleaning up the apartment. While we were upstairs, we heard this rumbling, and here the house next door, fell, a bomb. And we were still upstairs. So we ran down. Naturally, the dust was all over the apartment again. We never went up anymore.

Were there other people in the apartment building?

Yes. It was a three story apartment building.

And what did they think about you being there?

Nothing. They didn't think about Jews.

This was the Polish underground fighting against the Germans?

Right.

Not the Polish Army?

No. Well, the Polish people, I would say, not only the underground.

Was there a Polish Army?

No. There was in London there was a Polish Army, but not in Poland. Underground and the Polish people started the uprising.

The civilians.

Yes. The Russians were in Praga, where we lived. And so the Poles expected them to come in tomorrow, maybe after tomorrow. But when the Russians saw that the Poles want to have the uprising, they went back and stayed put. They said, "Fight for your Warsaw yourself." And there were many, many people that were wounded and killed. We stayed in the cellar; I don't remember how long.

This is the cellar of Zutka's apartment?

Yes. Everybody was in the cellar, the whole building was there. Everybody had a corner and we had very, very little food. Zutka still was thinking about her stuff, her crystal. So one day Emil and Zutka went across the street to a chocolate factory, Fuchs. They made a hole in the ground there and put all her crystals in there.

They shouldn't break it, if there was a bombing.

Bombing . . . and we knew we had to leave. We cannot take the crystal along when we leave. We slept in cellars, like I said before. The men were making trenches, one trench from our building, where we were, to the other side where the chocolate factory was.

Under the street?

Under the street.

So it was like a tunnel?

No, it was not covered, open like a deep trench. So when the Germans come, we should be able to go on the other side of the street. The Germans took the city back piece by piece. And it wasn't hard for them to take it back. The resistance wasn't this big because they didn't have so many people.

When you say, take it back?

Take the city back.

Piece by piece they took the city back. The Poles were hoping the Russians will come to help them, but the Russians didn't. They went farther away from the city and watched.

In the street when they made these big trenches, they were like big holes in the street?

Right.

Only few pictures were taken during the war
Warsaw uprising in 1944



Digging trench during the uprising
(arrow shows Emil in the back)

So how did anybody go over with their cars?

What cars!? You didn't see a car on the street. We saw, in the war, what did they go with, tanks. Tanks can go over anything. So one day we were in the cellar there and Emil and Tadzik went across the street; they got some potatoes. So I went ahead and I cooked the potato soup. Nothing, I just cooked the potatoes. We didn't have anything to put in there. So Tadzik used to say to Zutka, "Well, why don't you make it?" She said, "I don't have anything to make it with. I cannot make it just from potatoes. So he used to say, "Wanda does it." My name was Wanda.

He actually called you Wanda?

Oh sure, we called each other by our gentile names, naturally.

What were George and Bob then?

George was Jerzyk and Bob was Robert, and our last name was Kaminski. So I made a very good potato soup, but we never had time to eat it because in the next building, the Germans already threw bombs in the cellar. So we quickly left the soup, the boys couldn't forget it for weeks. We took, everybody took a little bundle, like the tobacco and the cigarettes. This was the most important, and we went to this trench. And poor Bobby lost the tobacco. He had to drop it. He couldn't carry it. This was more than diamonds, you know, this bit of tobacco. It's all right.



Furniture used to form a barricade

Poor little thing.

We came to the other side, to the chocolate factory and there other people made different trenches to cross.

Did you pick up some chocolate on the way?

There was none. Well, we came to the other side, and we went through the trenches. But Tadzik ran around on top. He didn't go through the trench, and he was shot. He was shot in his leg.



Burning city of Warsaw during the uprising

I always thought he was shot in his leg jumping out of a trench?

No. The bullet went through his leg, wasn't stuck, just through.

Why wasn't he in the trenches?

I don't know. He just wasn't. And we came to the other side, and we had to take care of Tadzik, because he was bleeding. The Polish people had little stations where they could help a person like Tadzik.

Like first aid stations.

That's right. I didn't know how to say it.

And we took care of Tadzik, and all the people went to the other trenches. And all of a sudden, we heard a terrible, terrible noise. All these people that ran through the trenches were killed. They were shooting from above; everybody was killed. But we were not there. Again luck, because we had to take care of Tadzik. We would have been there. We were staying in line already to go through, but then his leg started bleeding. We moved back to take care of him. I just brought this out, because I just want to bring out, it was luck, it was "beschered", meant to be.

Then we went to the other side, and we came to the middle of the city, Warsaw. And there, we stayed because we were surrounded by the Germans. We moved there from house to house, from cellar to cellar. And you could go through all the cellars. They made a way, you know, they made holes in the walls to go through the cellars and not to go on top.

No food. Emil and I were going to look in the bombed houses for food. Once we were very lucky. We found a little bag, not a paper bag, a carton or something. We found there dried out bread. It was already moldy and worms crawling around. So we took the bread, and we cleaned it off. All the little worms, we took off. We divided it in two, and we gave it to the kids. We said, nobody should see that you have it. Keep it in your pocket and when you hungry just take out a piece. We didn't eat it at all, because we saw the worms. The kids didn't know; it was good penicillin! I mean maybe this is why we didn't have a cold, or were not sick! (Ha, Ha.)

And once, it was pretty quiet, we were in a cellar. Emil was so tired. It was wet in the cellar. I remember we came in and he threw his raincoat on the floor in the mud, and he laid down, and just went to sleep. So Zutka said, "You know, it is so quiet why don't we go up - all the apartments were open, nothing was locked, why don't we go up in the apartment. I think maybe we can sleep a few hours." We did. We went up. We all slept in one room to be together, and the boys we put on the floor. There was a very big Belgian mirror. Thick, thick glass. It went from the floor up to the

ceiling. And we put them back there on the floor where the mirror was. And all of a sudden the Germans really bombed the building, and the mirror fell apart, like in millions of pieces, and every piece fell on the boys. But not one drop of blood, not one scratch. We picked the pieces of glass out, one by one from the top of the boys. But nothing at all happened. There you have again, the luck.

And we were running away from this house. And from house to house the Germans took the city. And the Poles what were left, and we between them, they were told they have to leave the city. Warsaw has to be completely empty from people. We were told from the Germans to meet on this and this place. On loud speakers they announced it to meet by the station.

THE TRAIN TO CONCENTRATION CAMP

While we were waiting for the train to come, I was even offered a job to be a translator, a German translator. Naturally I couldn't take it. I just couldn't leave the family there. Well, these trains came, they were open coal wagons. The people stormed into the train, and Emil was keeping us back. He said, "Let's wait, let's wait." And Zutka was mad, she said "Because of you we are going to die. Why don't we go in? Come on Tadzik" But Tadzik said, "No, I go where Janek goes." His name was Janek. You asked me if his name was Emil. No it wasn't Emil. I just now remembered. And he said, "I go when Janek goes."

So we waited until everybody was in, and then we went into the train. Zutka and some other Polish friends of theirs, the kids, Tadzik and us. We went a couple of hours in the train, and the train stopped. It was a green light. We couldn't understand it. The train stopped at a green light. So Emil is very quick thinking, pushed Robert over the top to open the door. Every train car was blocked you know closed like. He open the door and took us out, took out Tadzik, the kids and myself. Zutka didn't want to go. By the train was something what goes down, you know?

Slope, embankment.

Yes. And we went to this embankment and we were hiding there. (I, Robert, remember jumping from the train down the embankment. I was so scared to jump, and when I landed my leg hurt so bad. But I did not say anything.) And while we did this other people saw it and they did it too. The Gestapo was on top of the train and started shooting. But we were laying there...

Was Zutka still in the train?

She was still in the train. We were lying there and waiting for an opportunity when the light goes away to crawl out of there. We did. There was hay a little farther. We were hiding under this haystack. We didn't know what else to do. The train left. Went in through the gate where the green light was. Later on we heard this was a place where they segregated women, children and men who were sent to gas chambers and to work to Auschwitz. Us they wouldn't send to work because they were taking their clothes off, and they examined them to see if they are healthy. Us they wouldn't have sent to work, they would have seen the boys and they would have seen they were Jews.

So we were waiting there a little bit until the train left, then we started walking in the dark. We saw a house with a light and we went in there. We came in and the owner (a shoemaker) said, "Welcome with Jesus Christ". This is a Polish saying about Jesus Christ, when you come into people. I don't know how they say it. In Polish I know. We came in and they said, "Oh, these are the people from the uprising from Warsaw." We were very hungry and the woman said "What would you like I should make?" This was the middle of the night. "Potatoes and onions". She went ahead and cooked a big, big pot of potatoes with raw onions. We wanted the raw onions because its good vitamins, you know. She got out of her bed, she was sleeping with her little boy. She gave me the hot bed. Hot, you know, when you get out of the bed, it's warm from your body. And I was sleeping there with the two boys. When I think about it now I get goose pimples! How could I lie in this bed!? But it was good then. Well, we had at night those potatoes and onions, and we slept until the morning.

In the morning we heard what had happened with the train. And they had an outhouse - you know what an outhouse is? I went to the outhouse. It was open on the bottom. You know how it is? And all of a sudden I hear, "Wanda, Wanda!" Zutka recognized me by my legs!

Oh my God.

So, thank God we had Zutka with us now.

She had gotten off the train?

She saw what happened and she had gotten off the train. She went in the morning around to look for us. And this is how she recognized me.

I always thought the train incident happened outside of Auschwitz?

Yes, darling, but we never were in Auschwitz.

I thought the train went on to Auschwitz.

Maybe they took some people from the train to Auschwitz. Maybe they found underground people there, you know. Or Jews there. I don't know. They took them maybe to Auschwitz or so. But the other people, what could work, they took to Germany.

Zutka found you.

Yes. She got a room for herself by somebody. First of all we stayed with this shoemaker there. We felt secure there. And then we took a room...

Didn't you tell me that the police came and checked on houses to look for people, that you hid in the cellar?

No. We are in Pruszkow. We took another room by some girls on the second floor, it would be considered here. It was nice. One room with a little stove. This was the place where Bob used to grate potatoes for potato pancakes or for this stuff what we made. There wasn't far away a store. We could go and buy. Once Emil took them in there and they could have all the sweets they wanted. Why they didn't get sick from it, I cannot understand.

How did you have money?

Well, we had from cigarettes. We were still making cigarettes.

Were there always places to buy the tobacco?

Yes, there were always places to buy the tobacco, always places to sell. We made money, and we had food. We already could go and buy a piece of meat on the black market.

This was 1943?

This was 1944. Then we heard everything about what happened to the train.

Zutka was living right across from us, and she went in with Emil once to Warsaw. It wasn't allowed, but they went anyhow. They took all the crystal out from the ground. Everything was in one piece and they brought it back. Nothing else from the apartment. The house was bombed. Not all the way bombed, because when I was in Warsaw, I went to see it. So they rebuilt the top floors. Nothing, nothing was left, I mean from the furniture or anything. It was a terrible day for

me when they went to Warsaw, it really was. It was not allowed to be done and him being a Jew and doing things like this wasn't right. Well, anyway, we stayed there in Pruszkow until the war ended for us there.

THE LIBERATION

One day the Russians came in. This is when the boys went the first time on the street. We went to greet Russian tanks. And on every tank was written down 'Made in the USA'. We were very happy to see the Russians, because now we were allowed to live. They didn't persecute Jews. And so we stayed there until we heard we can go closer into Poland. To my home town. Katowice was already free from the Germans.

We left the boys with these two sisters. They were very nice girls. They still didn't know that we were Jewish.

We went on the first train what went to Katowice. We only could get into the locomotive, where they were shoveling the coal. And this is how we went the first time to Katowice. My home town was still not free from the Germans, they still were fighting there. This was when I went to look at the house on Krakowska in Katowice, the building we owned. And I saw there the Geminder, the step brother from my first husband. Joseph. (Joseph Geminder was the first husband's half brother, from the same father, but a second wife of Robert's grandfather.) He lives now in Katowice. He was there looking at our house, because a bomb went through the attic on the third floor. It had to be fixed. So he thought that he was the only survivor. He thought he would take it over. When he saw us, naturally, he knew that I was the owner of it. We never saw him again, until much later. He was embarrassed to have wanted to claim the building, and to find us still alive.

[I wonder why we never looked him up when we were in Poland?](#)

I don't know. I think he didn't want to. His children don't even know he's Jewish. So he does not want any mail or anything. When Bobby was sending the Geminder family tree, he asked me, "Please don't send it, because I don't want to have anything that the children should know about it." Well, in a way, where he lives there it's all right because he wouldn't have the job that he has.

We went back to Warsaw, and now we took the kids, and these little belongings what we had, and we went to Katowice. We lived there with some Jewish friends. We met some people and we lived with them. The few Jews that were left, they kept together. One was watching the other one to help, everybody wanted to help. Especially when somebody was left with two boys! It did not exist. I don't know another family that survived with two boys.

Anyhow, we got bread cards to buy bread, rations. Wherever I was, I left a note, like in the Jewish Federation. Every city had already a Jewish Federation. I left a note, "Bertha Geminder is alive and she lives there and there." When I went to Katowice I left a note in Pruszkow. I went from Katowice later to my home town, Bielitz, which was liberated. And there I had the house from my parents, and we decided this is where we are going to live.

[It had never been bombed or anything?](#)

No, it had not been bombed. Our apartment, people were living there naturally, but mostly Germans, and they went away. So there were a few empty apartments, and many Jews took apartments there. You had to put in that you want the apartment even when you are the owner of the house. I put in that I want the apartment where my wedding was. This big apartment on the first floor. We wanted two apartments, in case someone came they could have one. And I had to go on my own name, but Emil went under the name of Sokolowski. He got the apartment right away. I had to wait a few weeks, because I was Jewish.

But it was OK then to let them know that you were Jewish?

Oh, yes, when the Russians were there. Many Jews came back from the concentration camps. Jews came back from living on gentile papers. Bielitz was a very nice town, so they came there to live. It was a smaller town. You got the apartments there faster. So we started to fix up our apartment. I got some things back what my parents left.

But this was not the apartment that your parents lived in before?

My husband Emil took that one.

He took that one, you took the other one.

I took the other one. We figured, somebody comes, you want to give them the apartment, what we did later. Because we didn't need two apartments. The one on the first floor was a very big one. We started to get furniture and get carpeting, not carpeting, rugs. We had already very good Persian rugs.

But the war was not over?

The war was over, yes. We lived in a town right by the border.

It was over everywhere?

It was over everywhere. This was already 1945, the war ended. I don't know if every city in Germany was taken already, maybe Berlin was a few months later. But in Poland the war was over. And even Breslau was liberated already. Breslau, it belonged to Poland.

When we heard the war was over, there was a siren that went on for hours and hours. You know, everybody said, the war is over this day. That obviously didn't happen there. Each little place the war was over at a different day.

Right.

I want to go back a minute. When the Russians came in, there were German soldiers there. What did they do? They rounded them all up and did they put them in some kind of camps or just ship them back?

I didn't see it. I don't know. Back where?

To Germany.

Back to Russia, they kept them prisoners.

They went to Prisoners of War camps.

Sure. They kept them prisoners. And on the way they killed a few.

The Prisoner of War camps were in Russia?

Yes. To my knowledge. Anyway, we were living in Bielitz. I went every morning to the market to

buy fresh fruit and vegetables. I think the boys still remember that. And fresh bread, everyday.

But there came a day, the boys could go by themselves to a movie, on a Sunday. First time really after the war they could go to a movie. And they went to their first movie at the ages of 12 and 10.

And the movie was Gunga Din.

Really? I don't know that. Bob remembers it?

After the movie they came crying home. The little Polish boys threw stones after them and were screaming, "Jew go to Palestine." They were crying bitterly. So, I said, "Well, this is it. I'm not going to stay in Poland." This was on a Sunday.

LEAVING POLAND

Monday morning I went to Czechoslovakia. I was going to look for Geminders because I just couldn't take those two kids and go through two borders in the winter time, it was winter.

I came to Morawska-Ostrawa, in Czechoslovakia. There lots of Geminders were living before the war. I went to the Jewish Federation. I told them that I am looking for Geminders. And one of the Federation men said, "Yes, there are Geminders. One just came from the Russian army and his wife, Gina, just came back from Auschwitz." (Isko and Gina both came to the United States in 1947. They both died in New Jersey in the mid 1980's. They have a daughter, Ruth Kopf, who lives in New Jersey.) And he went right ahead to call him. Not even ten minutes, here comes Isko Geminder. He knew that somebody was alive, but he didn't know it was me, because he was reading always in the Jewish Federation the little notes I left. I think he didn't know it was me. I met him only once before the war. I came to a funeral to Morawska-Ostrawa before the war and this when I met him. And he remembered me, naturally. He remembered my husband. He took me right away to his home. He told me that he came from the Russian army, he was an officer. He was with the people what liberated Czechoslovakia, Prague. So when he came to his home town, they gave him a beautiful villa to live, on the outskirts of Morawska-Ostrawa. And this where he took me, by a car naturally. He took me there right away.

They, Isko and Gina, had this gorgeous, beautiful dog. Big, big dog. I stayed in Isko's house a few days. I told him that I want to go to West Germany. From there I felt, we had a better opportunity to go to the United States, where I have three aunts and an uncle. My mother's three sisters: Aunt Fanny, Aunt Bella, Aunt Yetta and Uncle Bernard.

[But you weren't afraid of being in Germany?](#)

In West Germany where the Americans were? No, no. I just didn't know how to go through two borders with the two kids in the winter.

[It was hard to get papers to go over?](#)

You didn't have any papers, you had to go on the green border, which means you had to smuggle yourself through from Czechoslovakia to Germany. From Poland to Czechoslovakia in the border town, Bielitz, where we were living, they gave you 'pszepuska'. A piece of paper what you can cross the border for the day. So I didn't have to come back. So this what I did, on Monday, after the movie incident.

[Like a pass?](#)

Yes. When I got to Czechoslovakia. I didn't have a passport or anything, it's just a pass to cross the border and to come back the next day. But I didn't, and they didn't check if I came back the next day or not. So I told Isko that I would like him to keep the children for a little while, while Emil and I would go to Germany and see if we can find a place to live and get some rationing cards.

[This is still in 1945?](#)

Yes. I couldn't come to a strange city and not have anywhere to sleep with those two kids. And no cards for any food. So, naturally, Isko was right away willing to do this.

I went back to Bielitz. I told Emil what I want to do, and he wanted me to wait until the winter is

over. Zutka even came from Lodz, she was living in a different city. She came to talk to me. Wait for the winter to be over until you do this. It's hard to go on the border in the snow over the mountains. I said, "No. I'm not going to wait. I'm going to go right now and when Emil doesn't want to go, he can stay. I am going." So Emil saw it was not to joke about, so we started to sell what ever we could from the apartment. Some things we gave to Zutka.

We went. I wore then a beret, a navy blue beret, a little hat. We had a little bit of money, but we were not allowed to take it to another country. So I sewed it into the beret, the money. This is how we crossed the border to Czechoslovakia. We came to Morawska-Ostrawa.

How did you cross it?

We got papers.

Did you go by train, or...?

No, no! A bridge. It was in Cieszyn. There was Polish Cieszyn and there was Czechoslovakian Cieszyn, and there was a bridge from one to the other. And you walked over this bridge. And there were the Poles looking at the little card what you had and on the other side there were the Chechs. And they let you in for the day.

We used to do this before the war. For instance, we went to a movie, to a German movie in Czechoslovakia. So, we went on Sundays, to see a movie because there they didn't have, in Bielitz, German movies.

We came to Morawska-Ostrawa, and we left the children there. Emil and myself, we went on the green border. You know already what means the green border? It was not so much snow then, I remember, it was not too bad. And we came to Regensburg. It was the closest town to the border. Then we went to the Jewish Federation again, and told them who we are, and that we would like to find an apartment or a room here with our children. We want to go back and pick up the children to come here. So they gave us a room, by a Gestapo, of all people.

Terrific.

Yes. I thought so too, but I guess they gave us what they could. This was an older Gestapo man with his wife. We had one room and I could use the kitchen with them. We got right away, bread cards, ration cards. Not only for bread, for everything you had to buy.

We found there the people that we were staying with in Katowice, when we came the first time. We found these people living there too. We had to smuggle ourselves back to Czechoslovakia. We came there to pick up the boys and stayed a short time with Isko and Gina. They were extremely nice to us, very, very nice. Just like it would be my brother. They didn't have children and they really were wonderful to the boys.

Isko even got us somebody, a man, what would help us to go on the border to Germany, to cross the border in the winter time. I mean, you don't know where to go, you can go back to Russia instead of going to Germany by mistake. We stopped in Marienbad. We stopped in Karlsbad, and we came to the border at night.

What did you take with you?

Just hand bags, what we could carry. Very, very little. Nothing really, very little. Because it was very hard to cross, especially with all the snow in the mountains. So we left lots of stuff with Isko

and Gina. We came to Regensburg. Very tired, all night we walked.

Bob says he remembers climbing mountains.

Yes. This what we had to do. To cross the border, we had to climb the mountains. We had to climb the mountains in the snow. This why we went first to arrange everything, and then we climbed the mountains.

Did you go on just trails?

Well, this man knew the way, this why we had to have somebody.

There were no roads across the mountains or anything?

No. No. This why we had to have somebody in the snow to go with us. When there is no snow, you can orient yourself better, but in the snow it was really very hard. We actually went through tunnels in the snow.

How long did it take you to go?

All night. We were very close where we started from the border. But when we came on the other side, the Americans saw us crossing. So, I think it was then that they put us someplace. I don't remember exactly, not in jail, but they put us together with other people. And when I saw the first American, I just wanted to go on the floor and kiss his feet. Anyhow, we are now in Regensburg and I have to come back to some things. You wanted to ask me some other things from the war.

Germany, 1946



George at the age of 13



Robert at the age of 11

LETS GO BACK
Additional Questions

What happened to your mother and your brother?

My mother and my brother, yes. My mother was left there with my brother. I arranged everything for her with this woman. I wanted that she should come with her to Warsaw to us.

When was this?

Before I left the ghetto. I arranged everything for her with the same woman I left.

The Warsaw ghetto, no the other ghetto?

No, Stanislawow ghetto. I wasn't in the Warsaw ghetto.

Right, OK.

My mother was packed. She had all her belongings, what she could take already by the woman. This volksdeutsche woman what was supposed to bring her. And one day I got, this will be hard to say, I got a letter from my brother. And he said, "We don't have a mother anymore." My mother got ready to leave and she walked on the street. She wore the same dress what I put her diamonds and money in the buttons before I left. So she always wore this dress when she went out. She walked the street and a German came up to her, took her on the side, and shot her. This Lola told me, I didn't know.

In the ghetto?

In the ghetto.

Just for no reason?

There didn't have to be a reason. What reason? What reason was there for all the people, to kill them? And so my brother wrote me, we don't have a mother anymore. I was in the Post Office. Emil must have known about it already because on this day he went with me. We always had our mail sent to the Post Office, like a little box.

Post Office box.

And he must have known, because on this day he wanted to go with me to the Post Office. And we came out from the Post Office and I read the letter and he said to me, "Don't cry. Don't let on because they are going to catch us." So I read this letter that I don't have a mother anymore, and I was not allowed to cry. I never could cry since this day, until very recently, that I can cry. And this is how I lost my mother.

And then my brother, he was in the ghetto. Nobody was alive anymore. And they liquidated the ghetto. This means, they killed all the Jews which were left there. And he ran out of the ghetto. He ran to the gentile side and into a house. They came after him, and they shot him in the house.

What about his wife?

She was gone already, the parents, his wife were gone already. They were all gone already. Arthur was working for the Jewish police in the ghetto. So I guess they let these people live to the end, because they needed them. And this how I lost him.

So really, nobody was left anymore. I figured it out. Like 64 people, our family gone. To my knowledge, I was the only survivor in Europe. Nobody else, I mean in the German section of Europe. Well, in Russia there was Joe Rottersman and Isko Geminder, they came back. Anyway, this was how my mother and my brother went.

Now you wanted to know about Lola's husband? Well, Lola came to Warsaw with Miriam (1942), after we were there already.

How did she get out of the ghetto?

Same way I did. They had false papers. They took a train, and they went. I mean Lola and Miriam could have gone anywhere because they didn't look Jewish at all. She applied for a job, and she got a job by a Gestapo doctor to be with children. What you call it? A governess. The Gestapo doctor had a cook, they had a maid, and Lola for the kids. She got a job for her daughter by another Gestapo man.

I met Lola once in awhile in Warsaw by the Post Office. Very seldom, but we did keep in contact. Then I didn't hear from her anymore, so I just didn't know if they died or what happened to them. Anyhow, after the war, I heard that she was in a town in Germany. I wrote there, and I got an answer from the United States. Lola and Miriam were in the United States. She and Miriam came to pick us up from the boat when we came to New York from Europe. She came with Aunt Sarah. This was my first husband Emil Geminder's sister. (Sarah Gerson lived in East Orange, New Jersey. She and her husband died, but her children still live in the United States.) Lola's husband was in Krackow, and her son too. Gorgeous, blond, gentile looking boy. Nobody could recognize him as a Jew. So he was working and getting papers for Jews and helping out the people.

You were going to tell me how you met Emil.

Oh, yes. This is very funny! When they made the ghetto in Stanislawow, I told you that I got an apartment in a big building. In the same building, my brother was living and Emil was living. One apartment. My brother was living with Gierowitz. (Nathan Gierowitz survived the war and now resides in Southern California.) They were living together. The ghetto was not closed. We moved in. I was downstairs and I saw that somebody comes in with a farmer, with a wagon of potatoes. Well, potatoes, this was gold! So, I wanted some potatoes, too. And there was Emil. He brought this guy in, because he wanted some potatoes. So I said, "You know, maybe he has enough potatoes that I could get some, too." He said, "Yes, you could." But I didn't have any money with me. I think I didn't have any money, I had to sell something to have money. So he said, "Well, I'll lend you some money." And he didn't know me. But he did know me, he saw me already. And he took out some money and just paid for my potatoes.

I went down to see my brother and this is how we got to know each other. We started to play cards in the evening. And I always had something, like a few apples or something. Gierowitz came up, Emil came up, my brother and sister-in-law came up. In the evening, we were sitting and playing cards. This how I met Emil. This started our love affair. So, what else do you want to know?

You didn't tell the story about "rybke".

Oh, yes. I forgot. This is such an important story! During the war, on some Sundays, we took the boys to the woods. We picked up George from the woman where he was, and we went early in the morning. We spent all day there. There were no people there, so we could be there and have some fresh air. I always brought something to eat. Like I said, we made the cigarettes, we had already a little money. And Bobby always took a little jar or something along. Maybe a butterfly or something he can put in the jar. He always loved animals. So he found a little stream and he found tiny little fishes. It was hard to get those fishes, but he got a lot of fishes in the jar. It took him all day to collect these fish. He was holding this jar with the fish in water to come home. We had to cross a little stream on stones. When Bobby was crossing, the jar fell down with the fishes. He yelled, "Rybki my sie wylaly". In Polish it means, 'the fish got spilled.' So now whenever something is spilled or dropped, we say "rybki sie wylaly". Even Bobby's and George's kids know and use this saying.

Did you want to talk about the coal from the train?

Oh, yes. Well, when you didn't have anything to cook with, what do you do? I mean, how much can you steal from your neighbor? You just can't do it. So Emil used to go after a coal train and always a piece of coal fall down. And so he picked up this coal, and sometimes he bought a nice sack home.

Another story, I forgot, you will like it Judy. We really didn't have any money to pay the rent. This was in the first place where we were, by this nice man, from the railroad station. What was his name? Well, anyway, we did not have any money to pay the rent. I had a pair of shoes, red shoes, this crocodile leather, high heeled. I went to the store where we used to buy bread to sell the shoes. But she wanted to give me very little. So Emil said, "You know what," this was on Saturday, "Monday you go to the market and you get twice as much." So I said, What's going to be with the rent?" Well, I talk to," Truskolowski was his name, "I talk to him, he will wait until Monday." And we went back home.

In Poland they have on the streets these pictures of Jesus and Maria holding the child, and whenever a Catholic, a Pole, goes by, he crossed himself. We are very careful with this, because we always felt that somebody in the back of us is looking. So whenever we saw a picture, we always crossed ourselves. They used to kneel down like, half kneel, so we did this. And I see while Emil was kneeling down he picked something up. I said, "What did you pick up?" He said, "I don't know. Don't ask me." So we came home and he looks, and there was money. And there was exactly the amount of money we needed for the rent. We found this money.

He went right away and paid the rent. Well, I mean this was all incidents, that was really, I don't know. Today, I don't believe it myself. That this is really true. And we paid the rent. I still went Monday to sell the shoes, but then I really didn't need the money so bad.

You once told me that you saw the Warsaw ghetto burning.

Yes. This what I wanted to tell. We were in the first apartment, the same one where we found the money. I told you we didn't have any money, nothing. So I looked for a job. I got a job to be a cook. Uliitza Miodowa, a restaurant by a Volksdeutsche. A woman and her husband. She was a Volksdeutsche and her husband was a Pole. And this was across from the ghetto. The kitchen was in the cellar. When I looked out from this window, I saw the ghetto. So when I was working there I really saw and heard how they were fighting in the ghetto, the shooting. Some people coming out through the canal and running away. I saw when they gave up, and they took them away from the ghetto, on the same street. And I remember from the cellar where I worked, a screen, not a screen, iron bars. I threw out some bread. I don't know if somebody picked it up, but I threw out

some bread anyhow.

And they burned the whole ghetto. I was there in this kitchen, cooking, and having enough to eat.

I knew there at home there were three people waiting for me to come home with some kind of food. So, what did I do? I was stealing. I had a little bottle and every morning, the first thing when I came to work, I filled this little bottle up. I filled this bottle up with vodka. And I was hiding it in the toilet there. In the evening, when I went home, I took a piece of meat and I put it in my girdle, or in the brassiere. No, in the brassiere I put the little bottle. I had to go through the restaurant where the boss was sitting with the woman, the Volksdeutsche woman. They were nice to me, they didn't know I was Jewish or that I was stealing food. Sometimes they even told me to take some sweets. She said, "If you want to take a little, when you go in the trains, so you have something to eat." I thought this was very nice, and I did.

Did they know you had...?

No. No, nothing. Nobody knew that I had children or family, no. I went to the train. And I waited to take the food out until I was in the train. I went to a restroom and took it out and put it in my purse. I came home and here were these three hungry people. Well, I have to say, very often Emil didn't eat because the children were hungry. Emil can somehow live without food, even now. And he put the whiskey in a bigger bottle and saved it day by day until he had a big bottle. He sold it to the store where I wanted to sell my shoes. This was all Black Market. Every Pole did this kind of stuff.

One day I went back to work and I was downstairs in the kitchen. I hear shooting and shouting something terrible. The underground came to look for her, for the wife of my boss. Not for him, for her. But she already was hiding.

Why did they come for her?

Because she was a Volksdeutsche. They wanted to take her away. Many Volksdeutsche people they took away. She was making lots of money there. The German officers and everybody came there, so they just wanted to get rid of her. They didn't find her. Well, I was in the cellar, scared, that they are going to come down. Here I am with false papers. I still had very, very bad papers. But I wasn't so much afraid of the underground, I was afraid of the Germans. I had to wait for the evening to go home.

Well, I didn't know if I should go back to work, but I did. So next day, before I walked to the street, I saw already that something was going on, shooting. So I just didn't go into the street and I saw that they took her away. And I never went back to work there.

Following this, we had to take the children away. Right before we started making the cigarettes.

I told you the story about where we were living before the ghetto in Stanislawow. I mentioned a Mr. Singer. Mr. Singer was our next door neighbor. Mr. Isner was the one that we rented the apartment from, the room from. Mr. Singer was very nice to me. I guess this is why the name was in my mind. When my first husband was so very sick, and I had to go to look for a doctor, he was sitting with him, to watch him while I was going away. The children were with my brother.

Anyhow, what else? Yes, Lola's mother and sister lived in another city. Near Stanislawow, a smaller city. And I remember, Miriam went to visit them. On this certain day they took Lola's mother and sister away to shoot them. Somehow Miriam got out of it. I don't remember how, what happened. She did come back home.

And one incident, we were at Lola's, this was when I think the Hungarian army was there. The Germans still were not there. But you know, whatever you had, jewelry or so, you were hiding. And Lola took a watch and put it in a boot, in the heel of the boot. And Miriam one day went, it was raining outside, she put on the boot, not knowing the watch was there. So she came back with the watch in a thousand pieces. I never forget this.

Were you aware at all, did you have a sense of any of the Jewish holidays, or anything about when they were going on?

No, no, nothing.

You had no sense of time then?

Nothing at all. The only thing we knew, October 12th, when they took us to the cemetery, this was a holiday. It was Erev Shmini Atzeret, 12th of October, 1941.

Did you save any possessions from before the war?

Nothing. Not a picture, nothing. All the pictures, that we have now, and we have a few, were what we got here in the United States, from Aunt Bella and from Arthur Geminder. His father was my first husband's brother. We send pictures to America before the war. And from Aunt Fanny who lived in New York. From Israel, we got lots of pictures, from my cousin there. She gave me many pictures. All the pictures you see of the boys were before the war. We couldn't have anything. Lola's Miriam was recognized because of pictures. Lola had pictures from her husband and from her son which she put in her shoe. It has a bend, like on top. She had pictures made from it, because she was wearing it in her shoe for a long time.

You said that Emil's sister gave you papers?

Right. When we had to leave the ghetto in two or three days. First of all, the Germans were talking about taking children and old people away. Especially children.

Were you married then?

No. So his sister gave me her papers. She was killed by the way.

And we left in about two days. When we left, I told you, the kids were smuggled out. Did I tell you the story with the watch? Yes, I told you. His (Emil) sister (Pela Brotfeld) was killed when she went back to get another dress from the dress maker. She was already on the other side. Everything was already done for her, and she just never made it. The older sister, (Lonka Arak) she lost a son (Adolph). The older sister's son (Adolph) was killed when they took children from work away one night. The older sister, went to pick her up from the ghetto. She didn't want to go. She still had some furniture to sell. She died too. She was killed, too. But this is the story from the ghetto. What else did you want to know?



Pittsburgh, 1956
Bertl and Emil with Emil's brother Eliezer Nir.
Eliezer left Poland in 1933 for Israel.



Emil with Emil's brother Eliezer Nir.

BACK TO THE WEST GERMANY STORY

Before you went as far as Regensburg, but then you didn't tell us anything about Aglasterhausen.

Oh, you want a little more? This was already the good times.

That's good. Every story should have a happy ending!

Right. Well, I had, I don't know from where, my sister-in-law's address, Sarah Gerson. I wrote to her. I did not have an address from Aunt Bella or Uncle Bernard. Sarah wrote us right away and told us about Shamus. Shamus worked at the U.N.R.A. (United Nations camp for displaced people, run mostly by the USA) in Aglasterhausen. And Sarah told me that I should go to Shamus and tell him who I was and he will try to help us. So next day, Emil and myself went right away to Heidelberg. We left the children with these Jewish people that we know from Katowice. I wouldn't leave them with the Gestapo man. We went to Heidelberg, and from there I think a bus, I don't remember, to Aglasterhausen, which was an hour and a half or so from Heidelberg. We came here to a big, American camp. People in uniforms, American uniforms and UNRA uniforms. I asked for Shamus, and we were brought to the main building where the officers were and here was Moshe Shamus. I told him who I was, he knew already about us because Sarah had written to him. He was a friend of Arthur Geminder and Sarah's son, Dudley.

Dudley Gerson.

Yes. We told him that we were in Regensburg, and we lived by a Gestapo, and that we really don't like it. I would like the children to go to school, and I would like them to learn English. They invited us, first of all, to a very beautiful lunch in the UNRA where all the Americans and English ate. There were people from England, too. They were working for the UNRA. The first time there I saw a ham with pineapple, glazed pineapple. I never could connect ham and pineapple. Taste good, anyhow. We had lunch there and then he said, "You know, I cannot help you right now because our director Rachel Greene is sick." But it doesn't matter. He said, "She's coming back there and then why don't you come back when she is here and we can talk about it." He couldn't do anything without Rachel. She was the director of the camp.

Well, we went back to Regensburg very disappointed. I saw all these children there nicely dressed and the dining room with all the beautiful food. I was a little jealous. I thought my children should have the privilege of being there too.

In a couple weeks we went back. And Rachel was there. She was the boss. She was a swell person. She did not want to hire us, because she did not take parents who have children. She was afraid we would make a difference between our children and the other children. But Shamus had a little influence. I guess she liked us. We told her about us, and about what we went through and what the children went through. I think my children deserve a little bit, to be with other children, and to go to school. Or to have a little better life than we had there living with the Gestapo man. Anyhow, she got soft, and tears in her eyes and she said, "All right. You go ahead. You will be house parents for the children from six years to twelve years old." She showed us the building we had, it was a two story house with children of Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, from all over. "Children without parents and your children will belong to the same group." They were about the same age.



Rachel Green Rottersman who was the director of the UNRA camp in Aglasterhausen, Germany. Rachel married Bertl's nephew, Joe in the camp. Bertl and her family lived in the camp after escaping from Poland in 1945 until they left for America in 1947.

We went back to Regensburg. Very, very happy. We packed whatever we had, and off we went to Aglasterhausen. Shamus came with this little truck, or whatever they were driving, to pick us up. We came to Aglasterhausen and this was really nice. This is how our nice life began.

There was a school, and the children learned a little bit English, they learned English songs (Most of the English words were 4-letter words).

We had a big dining room where I had my group by one table, I had to see that they are dressed properly, that they wash for the meal, and go to school when they were supposed to. No hard work! No cleaning or anything! This all the Germans did for us.

And the only thing was, I got sick there. They thought I had TB. But I didn't. This made me very unhappy because with TB they wouldn't let me into the United States. I went to Heidelberg every week, Shamus or somebody else took me to Heidelberg, to a Professor. And he always said I had TB because, you know, they wouldn't take money, the Germans, to pay for the doctor. We brought him cigarettes, we brought him coffee. So he said this, so that we would keep coming. I really didn't have TB.

I came to the United States. I went through the place where they examine you, and even make X-rays of your lungs, and nobody ever told me anything about TB. So then we knew that this doctor just wanted our coffee and cigarettes. Rachel went with us to look for a sanatorium for TB people, but I didn't want to stay. And I stayed in my room for awhile, rested a lot. This is when I got fat. Next door was a farmer, German farmer, and Shamus and Emil they went there every day for fresh milk. So that we wouldn't have the canned milk, butter and eggs. You know they exchanged different stuff and every day I had fresh.

We were in Aglasterhausen, I would say, about a year.

The end of 1946, we went to Bremen Haven just before Christmas. We got out early from the UNRA camp. There was a reason, because I brought two children to the United States which were adopted, and they wanted a parent to take care of them. Somebody to take care of them on the trip. So I had two little boys. One was two years old and one was three years old. We waited in Bremen Haven. We waited there for our ship, a boat, to take us. The Marin Merlane was the boat that took us to New York.



The trip to America on the ship
Marine Marlan in January, 1947

You didn't tell about Joe, finding him.

Joe Rottersman came from Russia. He went from one place to the other. He heard that I was alive. And wherever he came, we had already left. He came to Bielitz, we left two days before. Anyhow, when we left Aglastershausen, I told Rachel that a nephew of mine was probably coming here to look for me, and would she please give him a job until he gets papers from his Aunt to come to the United States. A few days later, Joe came. We were gone. Rachel interviewed him and gave him a job. Joe and Rachel got married and they live in Chicago. (Now Rachel lives in Chicago and Joe lives in Southern California.)

Yes, we were waiting for the ship to come. Christmas of 1946 we were in Bremer Haven. The bigger boys like Bastomski, went to walk around the city. It was in the winter time, because we came in January to the United States.

You mean, there really was a Chiam Bastomski?

Chiam Bastomski. We never found him. We were very fond of him. He was a very, very nice boy. Nobody knows where he is living in the United States. We had a good time with the kids waiting there in Bremen Haven and spending Christmas there. It was nice. I had presents for the kids which Rachel gave me to give to them. Then here was the ship. We were the happiest people to go onto this ship. But when we were in the middle of the ocean, we would have walked back! Because we had a terrible storm, just terrible. I had a room because I was with the kids, with the little kids. The boys and Emil were sleeping downstairs in these military things, where the soldiers were sleeping.

Bunks?

No, just mats, and this went back and forth, hammocks. Yes. And you know when there's a storm and this goes back and forth, you can imagine how the sleep was. And I was there with the kids and other girls which were in the same room with me, seven, eight people in one big room.

One morning I got up, and I felt so sick. I could not be sea sick, because the kids and Emil were sea sick 16 days! This how long it took us to come across. It was one good thing we had these rooms on the top deck, so in the day time Emil and the boys could be there. When I felt sick I figured I have to go with those kids to breakfast, I have to feed them. I got up, and I wasn't sick. I

showed them.

Were they real little?

Two and three years old.

Did they get sick?

No. Somehow these little ones didn't get sick. The food was marvelous. But not Bob, not George, not Emil. They couldn't eat anything.

Anyhow, when we saw the Statue of Liberty, this was about the nicest day in my life. This I forgot to say, that we were calling SOS from the high sea because this ship, a piece broke off! In the storm. Well, make a long story short, but we came to . . .

You turned back though, didn't you?

No, we didn't turn back. We went around, it took 16 days. What took with another one three or four days to cross the ocean. We came to New York and here was Lola and Miriam and my sister-in-law. The boys and Emil were very sick.

What sister-in-law?

My first husband's sister. Sarah Gerson. She lived in East Orange, New Jersey. She took us to her house, where we stayed a week until the kids were better. I never forget, she had a daughter, very beautiful girl, Muriel. They called her Babe. And she took me upstairs and she said here is a closet, you put your stuff in the closet. Did I know what's a closet? I didn't know it was a closet for you. I thought it's a toilet! Closet.

A WC is a water closet.

So, I thought to myself, my God, what is she doing to put my stuff in where the toilet is? But then she opened the door so I saw. I learned very quickly, what a closet is. Well, we stayed with her for a week, and then we went to Pittsburgh. The boys went on vacation to her the same year. We stayed with my Aunt Bella, the other story is not important, it was a good life. It was a very good life. We worked hard, but it was a good life. Are you satisfied already?



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 1948
Bertl with her Aunt Bella and Uncle Bernard

[How did you get the job? Did you go right away to the Home?](#)

No, we went to Aunt Bella. Mr. Stark and Mr. Kalb had a meeting in their house to raise money for European Jews. Uncle Bernard was a friend of Stark's, and a brother-in-law of Sam Kalb. So they ask us to speak.

[Uncle Bernard was already married to Aunt Sadie?](#)

Yes. To speak at this meeting was a problem. Well, I said, I can't speak English, do you speak German? And my husband spoke Jewish. We told them all about what we went through. They raised lots of money. Then Stark was a big shot in the Jewish Home for the Aged, Kalb too. We were looking for a job. And they got us the job. First I was a nurse. In the beginning it was not so good, but then it came out very nicely.



Bertl, Emil, and their granddaughter, Ellen Geminder, Robert's daughter



Bertl in the back with her son Robert, and Robert's daughter, Mindy Geminder.



Bertl and her grandson, Shia.



Bertl with her first granddaughter,
Hope Geminder, George's daughter



Bertl's grandchildren Michael and Jenny,
George's children

Bertl and Emil with granddaughter
Jenny, George's daughter.



Bertl great granddaughter,
Lauren Ashley Geminder.

AGAIN, LET'S GO BACK

OK, what else you want to know? You want to know about my father, yes?

Yes.

Like I said, my father was taken away in another little town near Stanislawow, where I picked up George and my mother. But the Jewish Federation, they found out that these people from this little city are in this and this jail. We even send a couple of packages there. We don't know if my father ever got them. Where Lola was living there was a balcony going to the street. It was said that they had taken these people what came from this town on trucks and they take them into the woods and there they killed them. We stayed on this balcony for hours and hours and this big truck loaded with people covered up with this military heavy blanket, canvas. And from the truck, the blood was dropping on the street. Drop by drop; they probably beat these people before they put them in the truck and took them to the woods. And this where my father was killed.

Where did the stone in my (Judy) ring come from?

Your stone was bought just after the war, darling.

In Europe, not here?

Just you know, like the bracelet was bought after the war. In Europe. Because I didn't have anything. Not a watch, nothing, nothing left. This all was sold or traded or given away for food.

When were you and Wujek married?

We were married in Heidelberg in 1946. Rachel said we had to get married before we come to the United States. I wanted to get married in the United States where I have my family. But she said, "It will be very hard for you to go together to the States. You have to go together like a family." And it was true. So we got married the 18th of May, 1946.

In a civil ceremony, or . . . ?

Only by the judge, you know, no Jewish marriage. I always wanted to leave it till we come to the United States to have a Jewish wedding, but it never came to it, somehow. I really did. That the family should be there. But anyhow, this is the end of it.

And you have more questions?

The beginning of the good stuff.

Yes, it was all right. It was good. We looked for the people. We looked for many people after the war. Like for this doctor who helped us and Bob. The woman doctor what took him to the hospital, I told you the story. And she died, I mean she was killed in Warsaw.

How did you find Gierowitz?

Gierowitz we found, after the war. We were in Pittsburgh and we read in the paper that he is coming from Europe to give a speech in New York about concentration camps. That is how we found him. He came over with his wife. He had a wife who was in a concentration camp. She died a young woman.

Not Bronia?

No, no, he brought a wife over from Europe. Young girl, a very nice person, and she had TB and she died a very short time afterwards. Then we met Bronia when he wasn't married yet, he was just courting her so to say. They got married. They stopped in Pittsburgh before they went to Los Angeles. Emil gave him the idea he should look into nursing home business because of the Jewish Home. So he did.



Robert and his wife Judy,
overlooking the Pacific ocean

Bertl's son Robert and wife Judy,
"It is never too late to have a happy childhood"





George and his wife, Aggie

MORE QUESTIONS FROM ROBERT AND A FEW CLARIFICATIONS

The first question, goes way back to the beginning, when you said you went to a Jewish school. And then you said that its not private, and I don't understand that. How can a Jewish school in that part of Europe have not been a private school?

Well, because it wasn't a private school. We had Jewish schools there. We had the Jewish kindergarten. We didn't have a Jewish gymnasium or high school.

Where?

In Bielitz.

You mean it was free? It was a kindergarten, or grade school.

That's right.

OK. The issue of the funeral and Bob's father's death.

Let me tell you. The Germans bombed the city very, very badly this night. And he was very, very sick then. All afternoon I put his legs in cold and in hot water because his leg was paralyzed. When I went to the doctor, he told me I should do that. And so at night, he was in bed and the bombing was very bad and everybody went to the cellar. All people from the house, but we couldn't go. Mano, my husband, wanted us to go, but we wouldn't go. I said when something happened we be all together here. So Mano said I should take the sofa and put it on the window, standing up like. But I couldn't do it myself, so I called Mr. Singer and he helped me to put the sofa against the window so when the glass should break, the glass shouldn't fall on us. We always huddled together by the bed. He died the next day, in the afternoon, and the funeral was then on Friday.

OK, the next big issue is the cemetery. I just want to be sure what you meant when you were taken by truck and taken first to the cemetery. How important that was! What that meant was, that the people that came first to the cemetery were pushed towards the back. And every truck came you were pushed towards the back. So the ones that arrived the last were the ones in the front.

That's right. They died first.

And the ones that came essentially first to the cemetery survived that day, because they were always in the back of the cemetery.

Yes. In all together only 3,000 people survived from 15,000 people.

Yes. So you must have been one of the first 2 or 3,000 that came to the cemetery.

That's right. We were one of the first ones and they were just digging the graves when we came in. And like I said before, the cemetery had a fence around, we were close in the back to the fence. And this is why we survived.

Yes. And I (Robert) remember, you said you didn't know how we made it across the fence from the cemetery, but I remember the details, like how hard it was to climb and then I remember falling on the other side. I think somebody pushed me over the fence.

I wouldn't know this because you, Bobby, were there with my mother. So I really don't know. I cannot imagine, it was very far home. To come to our house. How you came there at night in this dark with my mother. But I guess the people went, so you went after the people.

Right. I remember a lot of people in the streets at that time. The next point, you say the doctor in Warsaw who took me to the hospital when I had typhus. You don't remember the doctor's name?

No, I don't remember her name. It was a woman doctor. I don't remember her name. We inquired after the war, but we never could find her.

Zutka doesn't know either?

Zutka doesn't know either, no. We don't remember her name.

OK. The other thing is, the important part during the war was the making of the cigarettes. I thought I would offer a little explanation of how the cigarettes were made. You bought the paper and the tube. Polish cigarettes in that day consisted of a half a paper of tobacco and half a tube. The tube was a filter. And what you did was you put tobacco in the little tube with a piston and you pushed this piston up and it filled up the little white part of the cigarette. And then you cut off the excess tobacco.

Right, right. This was your job, Bobby, cutting off the tobacco.

We also took the cigarette and burned it on the end to make sure the tobacco wouldn't fall out.

That's right. See Bobby, how you remembered it all?

That's how the cigarettes were made.

Right, and I went every day to sell the cigarettes.

You also don't remember the name of the woman that kept George near Warsaw?

No. I don't remember the name.

One thing you said, when you made me look not Jewish. Why don't you tell us, what you did when you made me look not Jewish.

Well, I bleached your hair and even your eyebrows. George we bandaged as if he had an ear infection and an eye infection. They don't see so much of his face. He looked very Jewish. He was very dark, dark hair, dark eyes.

He was the one, that wherever he came, they recognized him for being Jewish. And then we had something, when we both went away and left you alone, to put on your . . .

Pimpok, on the foreskin.

Yes, so it should look like a gentil...

Glue, it was glue. We glued the foreskin so we would look like we were not circumcised.

That's right. So when we left you alone, you had to do this, so when somebody should come to the house and the first thing they do with boys and men, they look if they are circumcised. All gentiles, at that time, in Poland were not circumcised. So this is what you did when we went to the city.

You mention how often Wujek changed his name, and why didn't you or us change names?

No, they never caught me. Wujek was caught three times and this is why he had to change his name. Whenever they got him and he paid money for it and they let him out.

Yes, but if you moved from place to place wouldn't they look up by the name?

No. We never had trouble with the name. We didn't have to change. We always were Kaminska and this was until the end.

Also, in the uprising, I remember, one of the ways that I remember, even today, my left from my right. It was when we were in the cellar in Warsaw, hours and hours and days and days in the cellar. People used to walk through from one building to another because there were holes in the cellars. George and I would sit there, and they would ask which way to go. It would always be the right hole instead of the left hole. So that's how I remember left from right. I would sit there and say, right, right, right. Even today a vision flashes in my head, when somebody asks right or left.

Really? I didn't know that.

The cellar was important at that time. You could go many blocks in Warsaw through the cellars, with never going upstairs.

That's right. That's how we travelled around the city in Warsaw when we went out from the house there. Everything underground, everything from cellar to cellar.

Then we were on the train, on our way to a work or a concentration camp, and Wujek opened the train door. I jumped from the train, I remember how hard it was to jump because I had a rubber band around my high socks. When I jumped the rubber band really hurt me. My leg hurt me for days.

I don't remember that. Why did you have a rubber band around your socks?

I don't know, it should hold up the socks. High socks, yes. High socks. Later the Russians came in. The way I remember this is that the Russians came so fast through our part of Poland that they went right by our town the first time. And the Germans that were in our town did not even know that they were already surrounded by the Russians. But later, of course, the second wave of troops got the Germans. They were still riding around in their carriages and they had no idea that the Russians had surrounded them.

What kind of carriages? I don't remember...

Horse and buggy. Horse and buggy carriages, as I remember.

I don't really remember that. I remember they were also on bicycles, running away. The Russians

got them, I'm sure.

Anyway, that's not important. The movie that we saw after the war, incidentally, was Gunga Din. Just to clarify it. We did see the movie and the stone incident occurred after the movie. The boys were throwing stones after the movie. But at least we saw the movie!

Yes, at least this you did.

Then we went to Czechoslovakia. And Czechoslovakia to Germany, to West Germany, I remember it wasn't just going through snow but the snow was so high that we had to shovel tunnels in the snow. Total complete tunnels in the snow.

Right, that's right.

Now, didn't they shoot at us during that, when we crossed the border? Wasn't there shooting?

No. I don't remember that.

I thought there was shooting.

I don't remember that.

One other thing, I think you forgot to say, is that in Aglasterhausen, the UNRA camp, I got very sick. I had rheumatic fever. So I was in the hospital there for about two or three weeks.

Yes. You had rheumatic fever and you also had the mumps there.

We were concerned they wouldn't let us into the States.

Right. When we came to the United States I right away took you to a heart specialist, Dr. what?

Mullen.

Yes, Dr. Mullen. That's right, in Pittsburgh. And you were not allowed to play ball.

Anyway, I had this rheumatic fever when I was there. Tell me, when did Shamus leave? Did he leave before us to the States?

Yes. Shamus left before us, just a short time before us. I know when Joe came, right after we left, to Aglasterhausen, Shamus wasn't there anymore. Remember, Shamus came to your wedding, Bobby.

The other point is, what did you want to say about the Rabbi in Stanislowow?

When we left the ghetto I couldn't take my Mother, and I had to take you out because they were taking children away. So I took Wujek with me to the Rabbi because I wasn't married to him and I didn't know what to do. So, the Rabbi said, "You go ahead and you will get married later." And this I wanted to clarify too. So we got married in Germany in 1946.

Good bye! Good bye grandchildren.

Well, I guess that's the whole story children and just keep it. Whatever is written. And someday maybe your grandchildren will read it. Maybe it will help that something like this never should happen!!!!



Bertl and Emil